Roots Run Deep

By: Vulpecula_et_Anser

It’s a little past noon, and Sakura is stretching her worn-out muscles as she watches her teammates spar. Kakashi-sensei had limited them to kicks only, which neither of them seem to really excel at using, so it’s a battle of much hopping and flailing. It’s amusing, but she dare not laugh; it’s not like she’s any better.

Sakura has only officially been on Team 7 for five days and has figured out pretty quickly that her teammates are on an entirely different level than her.

or

Sakura realizes she can live up to her namesake in one of two ways: float through life as a pretty thing, riding whims like the breeze...or become someone mighty and immovable, protecting the weak from the storm.

She makes her choice.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2022-01-27

Updated: 2024-08-06

Words: 131322

Chapters: 19

Original source: https://archiveofourown.org/works/36704950

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Roots Run Deep

- Introduction
- Recommended Reading
- Female; Small; Low muscle-to-mass ratio
- LDK
- Move with intent
- Feedback isn't failure
- Trial by fire
- Let sleeping dogs lie
- Greet with your teeth
- No takesie-backsies
- Burning ambition (and...youth?)
- Upon the precipice of knowing
- Seeds of change
- The reaping hour
- To open a door
- The mortifying ordeal of being known
- A royal invitation
- Growing pains
- The sandbox
- Second impressions (can be just as important)

Recommended Reading

Chapter 1: Recommended Reading

Well hello there! You can call me Vulpecula, or Vully. The pandemic has brought me back to my old hyper-fixations, and thus here I am, writing a nart fic at the tender age of almost 30.

Some notes: this is unbetaed at the moment, unless someone wants to offer! Let me know :) And please feel free to point out any typos/mistakes. Also, about the relationships in it: this is planned to be gen, and I'll update that if it changes, but I doubt it will. Full disclosure: Kakashi and Sakura will have a very close and platonically intimate connection, as will Team 7 in general. Think wolfy feels/pack dynamics, that kinda stuff.

Thanks for stopping by, and I hope you enjoy.

*Edited to add the cover art I made! You can also find it (and a version without the text) on my tumblr: vully-andthegoose

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: https://64.media.tumblr.com/c67453c036899c085e6c7ccd6abe5b78/a0b987acc9c149e6-6b/s2048x3072/bd379d8b0622924178f1317b71d135befb38defe.jpg]

It’s a little past noon, and Sakura is stretching her worn-out muscles as she watches her teammates spar. Kakashi had limited them to kicks only, which neither of them seem to really excel at using, so it’s a battle of much hopping and flailing. It’s amusing, but she dare not laugh; it’s not like she’s any better.

Sakura has only officially been on team seven for five days, and has figured out pretty quickly that her teammates are on an entirely different level than her.

With Sasuke-kun this is, of course, a given–he is the most talented and skilled prodigy of her graduating class, a Uchiha, and ridiculously cool to boot. He can perform fire jutsu! And nearly managed to snag a bell from Kakashi-sensei! Not to mention, it was because of *his* kindness to Naruto that they even passed. She nearly swoons thinking about it.

And Sakura hadn't been any help at all.

As for Naruto…he's supposed to be dead-last. He couldn't manage a single transformation jutsu during their graduation exams, and then suddenly overnight he could magically perform shadow clone jutsu during the bell test? It made no sense, until she saw just how *many* shadow clones he could make, and then it made a lot of sense. Of course Naruto had poor chakra control, because he had a entire ocean's worth crammed into a twelve-year-old body. Turning a firehose of chakra into a careful, structured jutsu had to be incredibly difficult.

Sakura still finds the boy annoying, but she can respect growth and hard work when she sees it, even if it's grudgingly.

(And she's determined to figure out how he has so much chakra, too.)

Sakura is proud of her decent chakra control, but she knows that it's related to how small her reserves are. Thankfully, she also knows that reserves can be expanded with meditation *(boring)* and physical exercise *(gross!)* so she's not completely screwed…but it'll take time. A long time. And probably push-ups.

And as Sakura watches her sensei's gaze remain on the boys, where it has been for hours, not once turning to her…she wonders if she has much time at all.

They've only done dumb D-ranks and some taijutsu training over the last six days but Kakashi-sensei actually *tries* to teach the boys. He corrects their form and has them spar against each other, and he turns manual labor into training and teamwork exercises. The boys bicker and squabble and mostly complete tasks *despite* one another, but it somehow works.

And Sakura is just…there.

She tries her absolute best to keep up, but she's no match for their stamina. She trains, mostly ignored, and when she tires, she's dismissed.

Sakura is used to being the teacher's favorite, the one they turn to for a demonstration or the answer to a question. Now, she's an afterthought. If that.

Sakura understands that they're still a very new team and she's probably being a bit dramatic, but it's hard not to feel lonely.

I should have expected this, she muses despondently. Sasuke-kun is the last Uchiha and Naruto is probably the Sandaime's secret grandson or something, given his insane chakra and weirdly chummy relationship with the Hokage. She's a civilian-born ninja with nothing truly special about her.

Logically, it makes sense that Kakashi-sensei would prioritize them over her, but that doesn't make it sting any less. Why was she put on this stupid team in the first place? A place-filler until they find someone more suitable?

Cannon fodder?

The thought of the first option rankles—*she* is on team seven, dammit, and no one is replacing her!—but the second one causes her stomach to bottom out with dread. Sending shinobi to their certain death is a wartime practice, and they've been at peace for years, but Sakura is rational enough to understand that she is still

somewhat of a child soldier. And as a clanless ninja, she's of the more expendable variety.

Sakura frowns, and sits down to try and touch her toes, feeling her hamstrings protest. She may not have a special bloodline or chakra, but that doesn't mean she's *worthless.*

No, she decides, something like resolve settling in her gut. *I was put on this team for a reason. I just need to figure what it is.*

A yelp draws her attention. Sasuke-kun has kicked Naruto into a tree, and the blond vanishes into the leaves with a loud expletive. It's an impressive move, and she feels the usual rush of giddy admiration—he's *so cool!*—but it's swiftly dampened by a feeling that genuinely shocks Sakura.

Jealousy.

I want to be able to do that .

It's not the "kicking a teammate into a tree" specifically that Sakura wants, but it's the…power? The word feels a bit heavy (she's not one of the megalomaniac villains from those romance novels her mom likes) but it's almost right. The capability, perhaps. The option to send someone flying, if she needs to. Sakura can punch and kick with academy-taught textbook perfection, but nothing like that explosive force.

She could do more physical training, she muses, but recoils at the thought of developing bulky, manish muscles. Sasuke-kun probably likes slender, beautiful, feminine women who are *also* powerful, so she'll somehow have to figure out how to do both.

But how?

Well, her teacher is probably a good place as any to start.

“Kakashi-sensei,” she says quietly. His eyes flicker over to her briefly, but his focus is still on her teammates.

“Yes, Sakura?”

Sakura frowns at the distracted tone of voice. He’s not paying attention to her at all.

It’s worth a shot. “Would you show me some chakra exercises? I want to work on my control.” It’s mostly true. Her control is already pretty good but she only knows the really basic breathing exercises from the academy. Her jōnin sensei must know *loads.* And maybe if she can show him how good she is, he’ll pay more attention to her.

His gaze flicks back over, resting on her for a beat longer than before, but before he can say anything, Naruto explodes out of the tree he’d been kicked into with a dozen clones.

“Bastard!”

Her sensei sighs. “Naruto, I said no jutsu,” he reprimands lightly. He glances at Sakura again, and seems faintly surprised to see her still staring at him expectantly. “Maa, maybe next week? I’ve got to go sort this out.”

“This” being the outright brawl that Naruto and Sasuke-kun have fallen into. The legwork-only rules seems to have been forgotten (or ignored), and Sakura can feel the licks of heat from Sasuke-kun’s fireball jutsu from where she sits.

“Okay, next week,” she agrees, certain that he won’t remember. “I’m feeling a little tired sensei, I think I’m going to head home.”

He doesn’t even look at her. “That’s fine.”

Sakura wilts. He’s not even disappointed that she’s leaving early. He just truly does not care. As a pathologically people-pleasing teacher’s pet, the idea of disappointing an authority figure is gut-

wrenching to Sakura, but somehow…his apathy is much, much worse.

She goes home.

An explosive sneeze erupts out of Sakura, and the crabby librarian shushes her fiercely.

It's not my fault these books are so dusty! Sakura thinks mulishly with a sniff. Honestly, she wonders if somebody had cast a dust jutsu or something because there is so much of it.

After the disappointing training session with her team, Sakura had *intended* to go straight to her room to sulk but found herself at the front doors of the Konoha Public Library instead.

Now, she browses the current aisle (Ninja History) for a few more moments, selects *Great Kunoichi of Konoha* and *Legendary Shinobi,* and returns to a desk with her spoils.

In addition to the two historical texts, she has two scrolls on D-rank chakra exercises, *Taijutsu for Dummies,* a medical book focused on relating chakra to anatomy, *Noguchi-Sensei's Ultimate Dojo Series: Five Jutsu Every Shinobi Should Know,* and a recent journal on agricultural science that she knows her dad will enjoy.

It's pretty late in the afternoon, but Sakura wants to get a head start on her reading before she totes all of these home, just in case she ends up needing to pick up some supplementary materials.

She starts with the scrolls. The first scroll is about meditation, and from what Sakura can tell is pretty basic. It goes over some technical aspects of chakra that she's already familiar with from the academy, and then instructs a simple regimen: while seated cross-legged (ideally in the lotus position, though that reasoning is not explained) the user should adopt a hand seal (that Sakura has never seen associated with ninjutsu), identify where their chakra is, become

familiar with its shape, and try and move it throughout the tenketsu in the body. It warns her that tenketsu in the head and major organs should be traversed with great caution, as missteps can lead to damage or even death.

She flattens the scroll, folds her legs up onto her chair in a rather poor lotus, and attempts the seal.

It's a simple one, thankfully. Sakura cradles the back of her right hand in the palm of the left, and the tips of her thumbs are touching gently. Both hands rest in her lap. She straightens her spine, and breathes deep, searching for that little ball of energy in her belly.

Her chakra responds as swiftly as ever, and seems almost eager to sweep into her arms, following the natural circle that her stance has created. It thrums as it spins out of her heart center, down her arm, through the patch of skin where her thumbs touch, before smoothly ascending up the other arm. Some of the chakra naturally radiates off, chasing equilibrium, and Sakura starts to sweat. Her reserves really are freaking tiny.

She closes her eyes, envisioning her chakra as a smooth, controlled stream. The circulation must be precise, as anything extraneous will result in unnecessary loss.

“Hey, no ninjutsu in the library!”

Sakura’s focus snaps like a twig, and her chakra spasms in her chest. As a result, she falls out of her chair.

The librarian glowers, and Sakura scrambles to gather up her materials, trying to smother the embarrassed flush that heats her cheeks. Perusing the rest of her study materials will have to wait until she gets home.

She checks out at the front desk, avoiding the librarian’s unhappy stare, and makes it to her house in record time.

When Sakura wolfs down dinner with the speed of a girl condemned before vanishing upstairs, her arms laden with books and a hurried *“sorry gotta study!”* her parents simply chuckle in fond amusement, accustomed to her bookwormishness.

The pink-haired genin carefully spreads out the books and scrolls on her bed, trying to decide on what to read next. She thumbs through *Taijutsu for Dummies* before tossing it aside in distaste. She definitely needs to work on her combat skills, but that’s a problem for future-Sakura, she decides. Current-Sakura is going to focus on more fun stuff first.

She opts for *Noguchi-Sensei’s Ultimate Dojo Series: Five Jutsu Every Shinobi Should Know,* which is a bit of a mouthful and the cover is goofy and flashy, but even a quick skim tells her that the book is well-written and thoroughly informative. There are also lots of little cartoon drawings of who she assumes must be Noguchi-sensei, demonstrating physical movements and hand-seals and the like. Noguchi-sensei apparently dresses like a samurai for some reason and has a rather fearsome mustache. It’s kind of adorable.

The glossary informs Sakura that the five jutsu she should know are (not necessarily in order of importance):

Transformation Technique; *pages 4 - 37* Body Flicker Technique; *pages 38 - 81* Body Replacement Technique; *pages 82 - 103* Clone Technique; *pages 104 - 134* Chakra Adhesion; *pages 135 - 171*

Sakura hums. She already knows transformation and cloning, but has never used a real body flicker before, or a replacement. She has no idea what chakra adhesion even is.

So, two out of five, that’s not bad!

The chakra adhesion sounds the most interesting, and if memory serves, the second scroll she had snagged was about something related to it. She flips to page 135, and then opens the second chakra exercise scroll.

Sure enough, the scroll describes something called “tree-walking,” which from the diagrams is apparently defying gravity and walking up vertical surfaces. *Oookay.*

Sakura returns to the book, which has a bit more of an in-depth explanation.

“Chakra adhesion is a bread-and-butter technique for shinobi. Scaling walls, climbing trees, walking on water—all of these abilities are critical for any shinobi to function successfully in the field, and they are all variations of the same general chakra application. Most simply, chakra is circulated to the bodypart that needs to adhere, and the interaction of chakra and the inherent natural energy within the object will allow traction and adhesion.

Some surfaces are more easily adhered to than others, based on their composition and density. For example, trees are one of the easiest surfaces to walk on. Their natural elemental energy is highly compatible with chakra, and the porous, yet firm wood is a great medium for the adhesive energetic interaction. Earth and stone are marginally more complicated, followed by manmade materials such as concrete. Water, while abundant with natural elemental energy, poses the additional complicating factor of requiring density manipulation. The shinobi must not only use their chakra to solidify the water beneath their feet, but also adhere to it, while accommodating the motion of the water. This technique can also be used with mud, snow, and sand.

With enough training, a shinobi will be able to immediately and subconsciously attune their chakra to any surface, even novel types.”

Sakura gazes down at the book in awe. How *cool!* She can learn to *walk on water?!*

She vows to master it as soon as possible. She kind of hopes that Kakashi-sensei forgets entirely about her request to learn chakra exercises and instead continues to focus on taijutsu, so she can

practice it in private. If she can whip this ability out and surprise her team…Sasuke-kun will be so impressed! And Kakashi-sensei will definitely notice her!

The scroll recommends just going straight to running up trees, but the book suggests starting with something smaller, and playing around with different materials and body parts. The more experience the user has with a variety of surfaces, the more easily they will be able to adjust to novel types. It seems reasonable.

So, she begins with an origami butterfly that's usually pinned to the wall above her desk. The paper rests in her palm, and Sakura closes her eyes, sending a tendril of chakra up her arm and into her hand. She visualizes velcro and honey and glue, imagines the tacky feeling on her fingers after eating a sticky bun. It takes a moment, but she coats the palm of her hand with the thinnest layer of chakra that she can manage, recalling any extra to prevent unnecessary loss. Sakura flips her hand over.

The butterfly does not fall.

Sakura then proceeds to gleefully stick anything and everything she can at first to her palms, then her arms, then her forehead, then feet, belly, fingertip, knee, nose. It becomes a game, one that she is thrilled to excel at.

At one point she has forty-two paperclips stuck all over her body.

Sakura is also sweating like a pig and almost gasping for air. Sticking small items to her body doesn't take much chakra at all, but she's been at this for hours, and doesn't have much to begin with. Sakura wobbles, but the lure of trying one last trick is too much to bear, and she hops off of her bed to plant one foot on her wall.

She wiggles her chakra around in the sole of her foot to get an idea of the wall's properties. It's drywall, so there's a thin layer of paint and about two inches of crumbly material, and then nothing. There's not much natural energy in it to interact with, but the high porosity

makes it easy to worm her chakra in there and fuse with what does exist.

Sakura tugs, but her bare foot remains dutifully sealed to the wall.

Actually stepping up onto the wall with her other foot turns out to be *way* harder and she almost falls onto her butt. How the hell is she supposed to stand sideways? She's not made of steel!

Sakura frowns. She supposes that having some momentum would help, but her room is pretty small and her parents are asleep, so that's not an option.

Instead, Sakura presses her palms to the wall and sends chakra to them as well. She's really panting now. This is probably a bad idea, chakra exhaustion is no joke. But she's determined to see this through.

With a grunt of effort, Sakura hauls herself up. Upper body strength is not really her forte, but she manages to scooch her way up the wall, probably looking like a demented to lizard to anybody watching (thank god nobody is). Crawling onto the ceiling actually proves to be much easier, because she can simply hang from her contact points, rather than actively hold and pull her body up.

Sakura shuffles along on her hands and knees, gazing down with wonder at her bedroom. She's never seen it from this angle befor! Everything looks so weird and she feels like a spider, skittering around in the dark. The thought makes Sakura shudder, which disrupts her concentration. This, combined with her exhaustion, causes the adhesion to waver, and Sakura falls.

She lands with an *oof!* on her bed, pillows flying up into the air from her impact. Sakura is sweaty and tired and grinning so hard her cheeks hurt. She *did it!* On her first try! She might not be a Uchiha or the Hokage's grandson or whatever but she *did it.*

Sakura falls asleep with smile on her face.

Sakura spends her weekend devouring the anatomical chakra book and re-reading Noguchi-sensei's guide. The historical texts are mostly forgotten, but Sakura plans to read them soon, too. Hopefully, they'll give her some inspiration about what kind of ninja she can become.

A great one, shannaro!

Sakura also delights her parents by gluing various objects to her forehead with chakra. They're more bemused by her ceiling-hanging, though her papa starts calling her his little fruit-bat. She practices running up the outer walls of her house, then trees. The ease with which her feet stick to a tree astounds her—she can do it almost without thinking!

It's the happiest she's been since she got her hitai-ate.

The weekend ends too soon, yet can't end soon enough. Sakura desperately wants to show off her new abilities to her team, but vows to contain herself. Sasuke-kun doesn't like braggarts, she would bet. Her time will come.

The morning passes. Kakashi-sensei is several hours late, as usual, but for the first time Sakura doesn't mind. She just perches on one of the bridge posts and settles into the lotus position (well, half-lotus, she's not flexible enough yet), her hands resting in her lap in the seal that she has learned is called *zenjō-in.*

Sasuke-kun and Naruto are too busy smacking each other silly to notice, which is disappointing briefly, but the sensation of her chakra flowing around and around her heart center soon absorbs her full attention. It's an odd combination of soothing and invigorating, like a cool glass of sharply herbal tea. She tries to match the cycling of her chakra with her breathing, and eventually finds a rhythm that her chakra seems to respond best to.

She experiments with making the path go beyond the circle of her arms, sending it down through her folded legs, chakra slipping through the contact points of her body like water through fissures in a stone. Her anatomy book describes using chakra to enhance strength and speed by focusing it into different muscles and organs, and Noguchi's guide echoes this in its instructions for the body flicker technique.

"The body flicker technique does not require a large amount of chakra, but it does require control. This is a deceptively difficult technique to master, especially if the user intends to make multiple flickers in succession. One 'step' can be achieved with relatively basic chakra control, as the human body is naturally able to handle a fair amount of flux. However, with every consecutive flicker, the difficulty of the movement and the stress the body must endure will increase exponentially. It is not enough to merely augment the musculature the legs or arms with more chakra; entire organ systems must be reinforced and metabolic processes stimulated. Furthermore, users without naturally heightened senses (via dōjutsu or clan traits) typically will need to enhance sensory abilities in order to be able to perceive their environment quickly enough for flicker movements. Attempting multiple flickers or tenketsu stimulation in areas such as the eyes without proper training may result in serious injury or even death. For this reason, a single body flicker is considered a D-rank skill, two consecutive flickers is B-rank, and three or more is an S-rank technique."

Sakura mulls this over as she hesitantly snakes her chakra up towards her neck and closer to her skull. On the one hand, she's pretty sure her chakra control is good enough that she'll be fine. On the other, she really doesn't want to blind herself.

On the other, other hand (foot?), if she could enhance her vision and manage multiple flickers, it would definitely impress Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke-kun.

Hmm.

Maybe she could try enhancing one of her other senses first? As far as she knows, her olfactory system doesn't have its own tenketsu like her eyes do, and simply circulating chakra to the channels near her nose should do the trick. Plus, her nose just seems like it should be more robust than her eyes. Sakura has no medical facts to back that reasoning up, but *whatever.* It feels less risky and she'll still be careful.

Sakura allows her chakra to return to her center, before calling up the teeniest, tiniest thread she can muster. It's barely a hair, but she still treats it with the same care she would use with a live wire.

Slowly, ohhh so slowly, she pulls the thread up. Past the sternum and clavicle, up and up along the jugular until she stops it at the curve of her jaw.

You can do this, Sakura, she tells herself. She must be firm. For all she knows, shakiness or hesitation could have disastrous effects in vulnerable areas like her head.

If Sakura were less reckless, perhaps lacking that knowledge would have stopped her.

Instead, she painstakingly weaves the thread of chakra into her nasal cavity and sinuses, not allowing it move anywhere that she does not precisely direct to it go. Sakura doesn't know how long it takes, but it's a while. Hopefully she can become quicker with practice.

Before the chakra enhancement, Sakura could smell a few things. The sun-warmed grass, a little bit, and the water of the river. She sometimes caught whiffs of her deodorant when her arms lifted.

Now, the scents *explode* in her nose, nearly knocking Sakura off of her post. A bitter marshiness from the river bank, sweetness from the woodland phlox and pickerelweed. Then, the musty smell of old wet wood, the bright warmth of freshly-bruised grass. Minty toothpaste (hers? Naruto's?) and sweat, a toasty yeasty breadiness from the

taiyaki stand four blocks away, and suddenly, *overwhelmingly,* spice and old books and cedarwood and *dog—?*

“Sakura.”

Sakura blinks, allowing the chakra thread to get sucked back into her heart like wool on a spinning wheel.

“Kakashi-sensei!”

Her teacher stands before her, hands in his pockets and head cocked to the side curiously. Sasuke-kun and Naruto are behind him, also peering at her inquisitively. “Maa, Sakura-chan, what were you doing?”

Sakura flushes, and looks down at her hands in her lap. They’re no longer in the *zenjō-in* seal, and instead are clutching at the fabric of her red cheongsam.

She swallows, overcome with an odd shyness. She’d been so excited to share her new skills with her team, to get her sensei’s attention, but now Sakura feels embarrassed. Everything she learned is still very basic shinobi skills, nothing to boast about. *Ugh, stupid!*

“Just meditating,” she mutters finally, still fidgeting with her dress.

Something drops onto Sakura’s head, and when she glances up, she realizes it’s Kakashi-sensei’s hand. He ruffles her hair.

“You were very focused,” he comments, sounding amused. “Good job.”

Sakura is more confused than anything else, but she smiles up at him tentatively, happy for the praise. “Thank you, sensei.”

Kakashi-sensei then informs them of their day’s duties: they have one mission today, and it is locating and safely returning the Madam Shijimi’s wayward cat, Tora.

“Ugh, lame!” Naruto groans. “I don’t wanna look for some dumb lady’s cat!”

Sakura can’t help but gasp. “Naruto!” she scolds, thwapping him on the back of the head. “Madam Shijimi is the Fire Daimyō’s wife! She’s the most powerful woman in Konoha!”

Naruto perks up at that. “Oh, she’s a ninja?”

Sakura rolls her eyes. “No, dummy, politically powerful.”

“Who cares about that?” Naruto immediately loses interest, digging a pinky into his ear.

“You should, if you really want to become Hokage some day,” Sakura informs him, feeling righteously pleased when Kakashi-sensei nods in agreement.

“Sakura is correct,” he drawls, pulling out that strange orange book of his. “In peace-time, confirmation of the Hokage is ultimately up to the Daimyō. If his wife doesn’t like you, you might be outta luck.”

Naruto looks like he might pass out. *“Ehhhh?!”*

Kakashi-sensei ignores him and then produces four radio-communication headsets from approximately nowhere, holding them out to his students. “Tora is notoriously slippery, so we’ll probably have to work together to flush her out.”

Oh good, a repeat offender. Sakura has a feeling this is not going to be a simple task at all.

Sakura is the last to receive her radio, but instead of handing it to her, Kakashi-sensei begins fitting it to her head himself.

She stares up at him, flummoxed. He’s more than a head taller than her so he has to lean down considerably, and it’s not like Sakura can’t figure it out herself (although in her peripheral vision, Sasuke-kun is also helping out Naruto with his).

Kakashi-sensei taps her chin with one finger and she lifts it obediently so he can clip the transmitter around her neck. He leans in close as he adjusts the mic and speaker, and then taps her again, this time on the tip of her nose.

“These don’t heal easily,” he murmurs so quietly Sakura is certain only she can hear it. “Be careful, okay?”

She flushes, both from the proximity and the implications. He *knows!*

Her teacher only unbends when she mutters “yes, sensei.” She’s unable to meet his eye.

He ruffles her hair again and Sakura resists the urge to swat his hand away. It’s completely fair for him to be concerned, and to remind her to be careful. He’s her teacher, after all. Sakura is just grateful he didn’t make a scene in front of the boys.

If she sticks her tongue out at his back when he turns around, well… that’s nobody’s business but hers.

“Status update?”

Kakashi-sensei’s voice crackles over the radio, and Sakura tries to remain as motionless as possible. She’s crouched behind a dumpster, less than five meters away from Tora, who is lounging in the shade of a small retaining wall.

“The target has been located,” she murmurs quietly. Sasuke and Naruto are moving in closer as well, and they’ve got the cat pretty well triangulated. No matter which way she runs, one of them should be able to snag her.

“Attack on three.” Sakura glances at her teammates, who look ready to pounce.

“Two.” She focuses her breathing, muscles at the ready.

“Thr—”

“THREE!”

Naruto’s screech completely blocks out Kakashi’s voice over the radio, and Sakura curses when she sees the cat flinch. *They’ve got to move, now!*

Sakura throws herself out from behind the dumpster and at Tora, who takes one look at her and dashes in the opposite direction. The cat scrabbles to halt when she finds Sasuke-kun rushing her as well, and makes another aborted turn when Naruto erupts from his own hiding spot. The cat is frozen, trapped between the three of them.

Sakura inches forward, heart pounding in her chest. They’re so close!

Naruto is making grabby fingers and she glares at him. “Don’t just—”

But Naruto lunges anyway, and for a moment it looks like he’s going to successfully nab the feline.

At the last second, Tora feints, causing Naruto to trip forward as he clutches at nothing but air. The cat then promptly leaps onto his head, claws flying. *Oh, boy.* The blond boy screeches and finally Tora jumps off, leaving his face looking like it met the business end of a shuriken tornado.

“Dammit,” Sakura spits, but it’s too late. Tora shoots up a utility pole, climbing up until she reaches the very top.

With a sigh, Sakura walks over to the pole. *It’s so tall!*

By some miracle, it doesn’t seem like Tora is interested in trying to escape further on any of the power lines connected to it, and instead is content to stare down at them from her perch, tail swishing angrily.

For now, anyway.

“Here, kitty kitty,” she tries lamely, reaching into her pocket for the dried salmon (provided by Madam Shijimi as bait and/or bargaining material) and waving it.

Sasuke-kun kicks at the moaning orange lump on the ground next to Sakura. “Nice job, dead-last.”

“I take it the target was *not* acquired?” Kakashi’s asks dryly over the radio and Sakura huffs, too annoyed to answer. She’s certain her sensei is lurking somewhere around here anyway.

Surely Kakashi-sensei could reach Tora, given that he’s a jōnin. If only Sakura was better at climbing, she could get up there.

If only she could…she *could* get up there!

Sakura gasps, excitement lighting up in her chest, and she faintly hears a confused *“Sakura-chan?”* over the radio but she doesn’t care about that right now, she cares about using her brand-spanking-new chakra adhesion technique, grabbing that damn cat and *saving the day.*

Sakura stuffs the salmon back into her pocket and places both palms on pole, trying to get feel for the material. It’s metal, which she hasn’t climbed yet, but a quick survey with her chakra tells her it won’t be any harder to climb than drywall.

Perfect.

Sakura backs up a few steps, before settling into a ready stance. She takes a moment to summon her chakra, which responds with the same eagerness she feels, and sends it down to her feet.

“Sakura-chan…?” Naruto this time, but Sakura pays him no mind.

Watch me!

She takes off at a sprint, ignoring the confused noises from her teammates, and leaps up onto the pole.

She sticks.

Exhilaration rushes through Sakura's entire body as she flies up the pole. Momentum is important, she knows, because she's still probably not skilled enough to move any slower this way. Her abs certainly aren't steely enough. She'll have ride this inertia until it runs out, and scramble the rest of way if need be.

Sakura goes up and up and *up,* further than she imagined possible. Tora looks as stunned as a cat can look, eyes huge and blank, and Sakura makes sure to slow down and adopt a crawl before getting too close.

If the cat startles…well, neither of them will survive a fall from this height.

When Sakura is only a little more than an arm's length below Tora she halts her ascent completely. The cat's ears are pinned to her skull and her tail is thrashing wildly. She's scared, which is not good.

Making certain that her legs and one hand are *firmly* glued to the pole, Sakura fishes around again for the dried salmon, before holding it out to the cat.

Ow!

Tora's paw lashes out and Sakura flinches at the scratch it leaves behind on the back of her hand, but otherwise tries not to react. The genin averts her eyes, remembering that cats don't like intense eye contact, and offers the fish again.

There's a beat. Then, Tora hesitantly sniffs her upturned palm. Sakura waits, determined to be patient.

Sakura feels the fish disappear from her hand, and after a beat gets a handful of purring cat instead. She allows herself to look, and Tora seems to have relaxed, now demanding pets and chin scritches.

Sakura obliges with a laugh, and then a squeak when Tora uses her outstretched arm like a bridge, clambering down from the top of the pole and onto her shoulders. The feline looks at her expectantly, tail swishing, as if to say *alright, peasant, get on with it.*

Well, no time like the present. Sakura looks down to gauge her return trip and immediately wishes she hadn't.

She is *so high up.*

Sakura isn't even afraid of heights but the fact that Naruto and Sasuke-kun practically look like little ants is making her stomach lurch unpleasantly, and she gulps. Okay, her options are climb down or figure out on the fly how ninjas jump down from high surfaces. It's probably got something to do with chakra distribution and reinforcing muscles, right? How hard could that be?

The pole sways a little in the wind and Sakura immediately wants to puke. On second thought, maybe she'll just live up here forever and become the weird utility pole shinobi. Or something.

Glancing downwards again, she can see that Kakashi-sensei has joined her teammates. *Oh no.* She can't look lame in front of him now, or he won't want to train her!

Resolve settles in her gut (or maybe that's stress-induced indigestion, it's hard to tell) and Sakura realizes that there's a third option.

With a steadying breath, Sakura purposefully reduces the chakra in her palms and feet; not enough to fall, but enough to allow her a controlled slide *allllll* the way down the pole, until her feet drop onto the ground. Naruto and Sasuke-kun look like fish, the way they're gaping at her. Sakura flashes her teammates the victory-sign, reveling in the mixture of shock, envy, and admiration on their faces.

Unfortunately, she only gets to gloat for about three seconds before her knees give out.

Fortunately, Kakashi-sensei catches her with one arm and tucks Tora underneath the other.

“Sakura-chan, you really stole my thunder,” he complains, but his visible eye is twinkling with amusement. “Your super-cool sensei was going to sweep in and rescue the mission.”

Sakura giggles as he rights her on her feet, still feeling a little light-headed from the adrenaline. “Sorry, sensei!”

Kakashi-sensei starts to respond but whatever he says is drowned out by a chorus of shouts from the boys, who have shaken off their shock and exchanged it for equal parts disbelief and eagerness.

“Sakura-chan that was *amazing!”* Naruto crows, jumping up and down in his excitement, at same time Sasuke demands, “Where did you learn that,” in an agitated monotone

The pink-hired genin realizes that all three of her teammates are gazing at her curiously.

She blinks. “Uh…the library?”

TBC!

I hope you enjoyed! Feedback is always loved.

Also I'm on Tumblr! Come find me: vully-andthegoose. I'm planning to upload some sketches I've done of Sakura in my 'verse.

Next time: Sakura-sensei teaches her teammates how to tree-walk, and pushes the limits of her own abilities.

Female; Small; Low muscle-to-mass ratio

Chapter 2: Female; Small; Low muscle-to-mass ratio

Hello everyone! Welcome back :)

Thank you **so much** to everyone who left kudos or commented!! I was blown away by the positive response to my single little chapter. I love hearing from you all.

By the way, if you haven't seen it, please go back to chapter 1 to see the cover art I made for the story! I think it captures the vibe of the Sakura I'm trying to portray with this fic. You can also see it on my tumblr: vully-andthegoose

I hope you enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Following Tora’s safe return to Madam Shijimi, Sakura gets to spend the next several hours trying to teach chakra adhesion to her teammates.

“I don’t get it,” Naruto tells her for the twelfth time after her twelfth attempt at explaining the interaction of a surface’s natural energy and chakra. Sasuke-kun is staring at his feet like they have personally betrayed him.

Sakura sighs. Clearly, her favored method of learning new skills—a deep technical understanding and systematic application—is not going to work for these two.

“Okay, how about this,” she starts, trying to summon some shred of patience from the depths of her soul. “Forget about that stuff. Just…

imagine your chakra is glue. Think *really hard* about getting the glue into your feet. And then run up the tree."

Naruto still looks helpless and she sighs again. "Naruto, it will probably take practice. Just keep trying. You'll start to get the hang of it." Hoping to sound encouraging, she adds, "I believe in you."

It's the right thing to say, apparently, because Naruto lights up like the sun and leaps to his feet.

"Didja hear that, bastard?" he demands, pointing at Sasuke-kun. "Sakura-chan believes in me!"

"Whatever."

Sakura sighs for the third time in as many minutes, watching the two of them take off for the trees again. Is this what being a jōnin sensei will be like? *No wonder Kakashi-sensei has grey hair,* she muses.

To her pleased surprise, though, both boys make it a bit further up the tree this time. It's not much, but progress is progress.

Sakura settles down into a half-lotus and begins to meditate. There's not much else to do. Kakashi-sensei had been all too eager to foist his teaching responsibilities onto her for the afternoon and skedaddled hours ago with a head pat and a "Have fun, Sakura-sensei!"

She's soon startled out of her concentration when something hits her forehead and a quick swipe at it reveals a leaf, ostensibly shaken off the tree by Naruto and Sasuke's antics.

The sight of it brings back memories of one of the few meditation exercises she was taught in the academy. Students were given a leaf to place on their forehead, chins tilted up to prevent it falling, and told to focus on it. Supposedly it was to help them concentrate their energy but Sakura suspects it had more to do with getting a bunch of pre-teens to finally shut up.

Sakura grins to herself and sticks the leaf to her forehead, sealing it there with chakra. Perhaps having a focal point will be helpful with learning to safely activate the tenketsu in her sensory system.

With that in mind, Sakura settles again and carefully begins pulling threads of chakra up her throat, bypassing her nose in favor of her eyes. Tenketsu, she's learning, are like tiny doors that require a very specific amount of activation chakra to swing open and allow more chakra through. Any less than the required amount will just dither about, any more and it will crash open, overflowing into surrounding tissues and possibly causing damage. Her anatomy book taught her that in some tenketsu this can actually help build muscles, as it mimics the kind of microtears that resistance training creates. However, too much overflow into the musculature (or into untrained musculature) can cause injury, and *any* overflow into organs like the eyes or liver is obviously very dangerous.

Therefore, Sakura adds more chakra to the tenketsu at a positively glacial pace, knocking at the door each time with a tiny shred more energy, *tap, tap, tap.*

The door finally opens, and so do her eyes.

Sakura gasps. Everything is so bright and clear and highly defined, it's entirely overwhelming. She can see an ant climbing up a tree twenty feet away from her and the individual threads that make up the blue shirt on Sasuke-kun's back. She looks down at her own hands and is at once amazed and horrified at the details of her own skin, every pore and peach-fuzz hair carved out in staggering clarity. *Gross!*

Probably the most disorienting change is the increase of her field of vision, as Sakura is pretty sure her peripheral now extends much further than it used to. The sudden increase in stimuli makes her dizzy and she shuts her eyes.

She lets the doors close. Okay, so enhancing senses isn't just about being able to *see* more, she will also have to train her ability to

receive and process that much more sensory information. Otherwise the skill is functionally useless, unless her goal is to instantly self-inflict a headache.

That will come later, Sakura decides. For now, she will practice summoning just the perfect amount of chakra to open the tenketsu. And she will do it again and again and *again,* until it's perfect. And then she'll practice it even more.

After two more days of morning D-ranks and afternoons spent babysitting her teammates as they learn to tree-walk, Sakura is *bored.*

By the end of the third day, Naruto and Sasuke have both nearly made up to the tops of their trees, and Sakura has probably opened and closed the tenketsu in her eyes over a thousand times. Furthermore, having now explained the mechanics of chakra-adhesion a dozen times and demonstrated it that many and then some, Sakura is pretty certain that she could tree-walk in her sleep. Teaching her teammates had been helpful for diagnosing any holes in her understanding and had all but perfected her control of the technique.

Which is cool. But she's *so bored!*

She hasn't tried to open multiple sensory tenketsu at the same time yet, but that's next, Sakura supposes. Combining eyes and ears makes the most sense, especially if she wants to learn the body flicker technique. However, she hasn't gotten much further with actually being able to process the newly heightened senses real-time and wishes she could ask Kakashi-sensei if there's a trick to not being overwhelmed. Unfortunately, her teacher has kept up with his habit from the last few days and disappears as soon as they finish their morning missions.

So Sakura continues to meditate, currently with about thirty leaves stuck to various parts of her head and arms as additional training.

The novelty of being able to glue random objects to her body with chakra has long worn off, but it’s good practice for maintaining tight control in several bodyparts simultaneously.

Her easy success with the technique also makes her teammates seethe with jealousy, which is satisfying in its own right.

A shout draws Sakura out from her musings, and she cracks one chakra-enhanced eye open.

“Bastard!” Naruto cries, and lunges at Sasuke-kun.

A few days ago, the sight might have scared her, at least for Sasuke-kun’s sake, but now she just sighs in annoyance. The boys are *loud* when they squabble, and it’s distracting from her meditation.

Not to mention, for the first time in her young life Sakura has found herself a little *annoyed* at Sasuke-kun. And not just once, but several times! Sasuke-kun, it turns out, is kind of a poor student when he's not immediately excellent at something. He refuses to ask questions, even when Sakura can see that he's visibly confused, and often stalks off in the middle of her explanations. Really, it's a little unbecoming of a boy so typically coolheaded and graceful.

In contrast, Naruto is annoying by being astoundingly *not* annoying. He's inquisitive and enthusiastic and listens with rapt attention when Sakura speaks. He even has a haggard little notebook that he scrawls notes down on, though to Sakura's eyes the chicken-scratch is entirely illegible.

Horrifyingly, she likes teaching him *more* than Sasuke-kun. It's unsettling to say the least.

However, unable to help her curiosity, Sakura allows the enhancement to fade but keeps her eye open. She can tell immediately that it isn’t a serious fight and that Naruto and Sasuke are just blowing off steam, but it still astounds. They fight ferociously. The clashes of their fists and kunai echo amongst the trees, and

Sakura feels that same envy bubble in her gut at how effortlessly Naruto calls forth dozens of clones, and of the lethally elegant manner with which Sasuke-kun fights.

Sakura thinks once again of her own distinctively underwhelming taijutsu and ninjutsu abilities and frowns. She abruptly feels stupid, sitting on her bum with thirty-odd leaves stuck to her. She might have exquisite chakra control, but she wouldn't last three minutes against someone who genuinely wanted to kill her.

No matter how technically impressive her new skills might be, Sakura realizes with despair, they would be mostly useless on the battlefield.

She watches as Naruto dashes up a tree, using a branch as a launching point to throw himself at Sasuke from above. However, the downward axe-kick only strikes earth as Sasuke leaps out of the way to perch on the side of his own tree.

They're both already incorporating the new skill into their combat, she realizes. Pride at the capability of her teammates wars with shame in her own shortcomings.

What little progress Sakura had made in catching up to them has already been swiftly dwarfed, and then some.

"Sakura-chan, Sakura-chan did you see that?!" Naruto bounds up to her, eyes shining with excitement, his demeanor painfully earnest. "I'm learning, just like you said!"

Sakura smiles at him, a new determination burning in her gut. "I saw, Naruto. Good job."

Then, Sakura does what she does best.

She plans.

As has been her wont for the last week, when Sakura gets home, she immediately inhales her dinner before sequestering herself in her room in order to pore over her reading materials. Tonight, *Taijutsu for Dummies* (ugh) will get its first scouring, along with the two historical texts she had picked up.

Sakura blazes through the first four chapters of the taijutsu book, which all fall under a section titled *Foundations in Endurance.* It's mostly a prescription of various exercise regimens in order to prepare the reader for more complex taijutsu, though it helpfully breaks them down depending on the physical characteristics of the fighter.

Sakura decides that the category she fits best into is *"Female; Small; Low muscle-to-mass ratio,"* which is kind of depressing to read, now that she's looking at it. She can also see that the section dedicated to preparatory training for this population is significantly lengthier than the section for those of the *"Male; Large; High muscle-to-mass ratio"* persuasion, wherein it effectively tells the reader to just skip to the fun stuff.

Sakura dutifully copies down a few of the beginner exercise regimens into her favorite pink notebook, all of which are nightmarishly boring variations of the same menu: crunches, punches, pull-ups, kicks, and squats.

Sakura sighs, reluctantly impressed by the granularity of it all. Rather than being a meathead's guide to punching harder, the book systematically determines an effective fighting style for the reader and then prescribes a training regimen. It's methodical and efficient, which are two of Sakura's favorite things.

Once she's satisfied with her newly transcribed training protocols, Sakura switches over to *Great Kunoichi of Konoha* and *Legendary Shinobi,* propping open both texts on her bedspread. Surely, she thinks, there will be a ninja or two detailed in these books that she can draw inspiration from. Someone whose journey to greatness that she can relate to, aspire to…you know, a *hero.*

As the child of two civilians, Sakura didn't grow up surrounded by other shinobi or get special training, unlike most of her classmates. Frankly, she's pretty sure some of them were handed blunt kunai instead of pacifiers as babies. Iruka-sensei was always good about avoiding favoritism, but even his best attempts at equity couldn't undo the years worth of a head-start all the clan kids seemed to have. It was like they were all born with direction and purpose, and the innate ability to live up to that destiny.

Sakura, on the other hand, grew up with an agricultural technologist father and a textile merchant mother. *Farmers and fabric,* her papa likes to say. However loving they certainly are, neither are a source of much guidance or inspiration when it comes to Sakura's career as a shinobi.

Therefore, it's up to her to figure out exactly what kind of shinobi she wants to become.

So, she reads. And reads. And *reads.*

And realizes with a deepening sense of dread that almost every single shinobi described in her books comes from a goddamn *clan.* Every surname is *Uchiha* or *Sarutobi* or *Hyūga* …the coolest kunoichi listed (in her opinion) is Tsunade, who is a Senju. They all come from long lines of fancy blood, with kekkei-genkai or special chakra or all other sorts of hereditary super-powered nonsense.

Sakura has none of that.

And it's not like Sakura craves fame or fortune or to be a legend… she just wants to be able to do good, while she's here, because she can. If she must be known for something, Sakura wants it to be because she would do anything to keep her team and her village safe. At the rate she's progressing, Sakura is pretty certain her future is to be a career genin who pushes paper until she keels over from sheer boredom.

And even worse, as a career genin Sakura will inevitably be separated from her teammates, who are sure to one day be jōnins, maybe even ANBU, tackling S-rank missions and saving lives. Naruto wants to be Hokage, for goodness sake, and Sasuke-kun's dream involves killing the man who single-handedly eliminated all but one member of the most elite clan in Konoha. Forget being in the same league, she won't even be on the same *planet* anymore.

Sakura throws both books onto her floor with a despairing sigh. Things are looking a little grim. The only even vaguely non-clan ninja listed in either book was Namikaze Minato, the Yondaime, and it's possible that the Namikaze *were* a clan, just a tiny and kind of insignificant one that happened to pop out the fastest shinobi known to man.

Feeling depressed, Sakura reaches for Noguchi-sensei's guide. The little cartoons of Noguchi-sensei demonstrating various moves are pretty funny, and she could use some cheering up. She flips to the section about the body flicker technique and begins reading through it for the dozenth time

"Not only is speed an excellent offensive gambit," says the little cartoon Noguchi-sensei, mustache whipping in the wind as he leaps across the page. *"But it is also the ultimate defense."*

The next drawing depicts him dodging a menagerie of projectile weapons. *"As you progress through your career as a shinobi, you will encounter unsavory characters of all kinds, and likely acquire enemies. And when these enemies catch you, they will kill you."*

Sakura swallows thickly, and turns the page. Noguchi-sensei disappears in a swirl of leaves just as it looks like a fire jutsu is about to strike him. *"But first, they must catch you."*

The pink-haired blinks down at the book her hands, and then at *Legendary Shinobi,* which is opened to a page depicting a certain yellow-haired ninja.

And thus, an idea is born.

Sakura's alarm blares at 06:00, an hour earlier than usual, and she swats at it blindly until it quiets.

It's so stupidly early. *Offensively* early. Kakashi-sensei probably won't get to the bridge until 10:00, if then. She could sleep for another two blissful hours and still have plenty of time to primp *and* meditate before meeting with her team.

But today is Day 1 of Becoming the Fastest Shinobi Ever, and she has training to get started on.

"Ugh." With a moan, Sakura hauls herself out of bed with the enthusiasm of a prisoner headed towards the gallows. *The things I do to be strong for my team…*

After splashing some water on her face, Sakura throws on her spandex shorts and sports bra so she can try out some of the exercises in her notebook. It feels a little goofy to be punching air in her bedroom, but she's not about to bust out these moves at team training until they feel less alien.

Brace the core, pivot the back foot, lead with the shoulder, follow through with the hip.

Her fist shoots out, striking nothing.

One.

Brace the core, pivot the back foot, lead with the shoulder, follow through with the hip.

Another strike. Far from perfect, but marginally less shaky than the first.

Two.

Brace the core, pivot the back foot, lead with the…

After a little over and hour of beating up invisible enemies and doing more crunches than she's ever done in her entire life, Sakura wolfs down a big breakfast, zips on her red dress, and hits the road, shoving two more protein bars in her kunai pouch. There's a little voice in her head that worries about getting fat or ruining her feminine figure, but she squashes it like a bug. *Being skinny won't make me fast…but being strong might.*

The morning D-ranks pass in a blur, Sakura attacking the menial tasks with militant efficiency. She beats Motoko-san's futons within an inch of their lives, tears the weeds out of Fukuda-san's garden like they personally insulted her mother, and delivers groceries to a young man while wearing an expression so severe that he legitimately yelps after opening the front door.

They finish their missions in record time.

Sakura's teammates give her a wide berth, evidently unnerved by her unusually intense demeanor, and Kakashi-sensei looks supremely amused when he ruffles her hair and bids them all happy training.

Right. *Training.*

Sakura rubs her chin in thought as Naruto and Sasuke attack the trees with the same gusto as they had on day one. They've essentially mastered tree-walking, and Sakura predicts this will be the last day before Kakashi-sensei has them do something else.

Sp today, Sakura needs to push herself. Test her limits.

But how to do it? Opening her sensory tenketsu is child's play at this point, but maintaining them at the correct level and with a steady flow for more than a few moments is much, much harder. She could try holding them open for ten-second intervals, perhaps?

Sasuke and Naruto fly up the trees in front of them, powerful and swift, and she grits her teeth. *It's not enough!*

Sasuke-kun lingers for a few seconds on his tree, testing the limits of his control. She watches as they both make their way back down, and a thought strikes her.

It seems so obvious, now. A little thrill of adrenaline runs up Sakura's spine, and she sets off at a jog towards a different tree a ways away from the boys. Climbing up is satisfyingly easy (though her reserves do feel a little low) and Sakura quickly walks out onto the underside of a thick branch. Sitting down (or, up, in this case?) proves to be tricky just because it's *weird.* Instead of lowering herself into a seated position, Sakura must pull herself upward towards the branch in an antigravity squat.

It's awkward takes a lot of shuffling (and she has to tuck her dress under her legs to prevent it from smacking her in the face) but eventually Sakura settles into an upside down lotus. She promptly sticks a leaf to her forehead, adopts the zenjō-in seal, and begins to meditate.

And oh boy is it *way freaking harder.*

The growing headache from the blood rushing to her skull distracts her and makes it difficult to feel how much chakra she's funneling towards her eyes. Furthermore, adhering her full bodyweight to a branch takes much more chakra than a few leaves, and then there's the frisson of fear that runs down her spine when she chances a look down. Falling from here would be very, very bad.

But despite all of this, Sakura smiles.

This, she thinks, *this is the kind of training that will help me catch up to them one day.*

"Shannaro," she mutters, opens the tenketsu in her eyes while letting her lids fall shut, and starts to count.

9…

Sakura was already sweating, but now she can feel it run in rivulets up her back, her dress clinging to her body obnoxiously.

7…

Her head hurts. Her lungs hurt. Everything *hurts.*

6…

She breathes through the discomfort.

5…

Nausea and dizziness seize Sakura with a vengeance. Her control trembles, but holds.

4…

This is by far the longest she’s ever held out, and Sakura would probably feel proud if she didn’t also want to puke, pass out, and cry all at the same time.

3—

Suddenly, the coppery tang of blood floods her nose and mouth, startling Sakura badly enough that her chakra wavers sharply. *No!*

Sakura flails and desperately tries to seal herself to the branch again, but there’s no chakra left to do it.

With a scream, she plummets to the earth—

No, no, no!

—and promptly finds herself in the arms of Kakashi-sensei, like a damsel rescued by her dashing knight.

She wraps her arms around his neck on instinct, and they land delicately on the ground below without even disturbing the grass.

Holy shit. Sakura's chest is heaving and she can taste blood, and her vision is weirdly red and blurry too, and *oh god did I blind myself after*—oh. She licks her lips.

A nosebleed, which in her upside position had trickled into her eyes. Not blind after all! Just a byproduct of hanging upside down for a little too long. Ha!

Which means she successfully kept her eye tenketsu open for almost ten entire seconds! *Shannaro!*

However, the cry of jubilance and pride bubbles and dies in Sakura's throat before she can make a sound.

Kakashi-sensei looks unamused.

No, it's worse than that; he looks *disappointed.* Sakura shrinks in his arms, which are still trapping her tightly to his chest.

"What," he begins, voice deceptively soft, like a blade beneath silk. "Was *that?"*

She gulps, avoiding his hard gaze. "Uh…training?"

"Training to do what?" he drawls, before dumping her from the bridal-carry into a rather unceremonious heap on the ground. "Die in the stupidest way imaginable?"

Oof. That stings.

"I'm sorry, sensei." Sakura can feel her lip wobble, which is probably the worst part of this whole ordeal. She glances at the trees covered in the evidence of her teammates' improvement and thinks of just

how easily she could be wiped from this earth. Blood continues to drip sluggishly down her chin.

Kakashi-sensei is unmoved by the display, and humiliation burns hot in Sakura's belly as she scrambles for an explanation, anything, anything *at all* to lessen the cold displeasure on his face. Even anger would be better.

“I just," she swallows thickly. "I just don’t want to be left behind.” The words leave her mouth in a hurried, tearful whisper.

Kakashi-sensei scrubs a hand over his face, looking even more tired than usual, and crouches in front of her.

“Sakura-chan, I understand that,” he murmurs, but Sakura shakes her head because *no, he doesn’t* .

Kakashi-sensei is a jōnin and fast and strong and has probably been that way his whole life. She doubts he was *ever* at risk of being left behind by his team.

He sighs. “Regardless of what you believe, you can’t be so reckless. If I hadn’t been fast enough, you would be lying dead right here with a broken neck.”

Sakura ducks her head, ashamed. He’s right, of course. And here she was, thinking she was starting to catch up to her teammates, and instead just made trouble for her sensei. To make matters worse, Naruto and Sasuke-kun are hovering nearby. She wishes the ground would just swallow her up right here. *This is so embarrassing.*

Maybe the broken neck would’ve been a mercy, if this is how her shinobi career is going to pan out. Better a quick death here, where she won’t endanger anyone with her failure, than some bloody demise out in the field.

“Sakura-chan.”

As if he could hear her thoughts, Kakashi-sensei's hand comes down onto Sakura's head in a light karate chop, startling an *eep* out of her. She stares at him in confusion, but his expression is soft.

"I'm happy that you're taking your training so seriously," he says. "But your sensei needs you to be more careful, okay?"

Sakura frowns, feeling thoroughly cowed. "Yes, sensei."

His visible eye curves happily. "Good. From now on, dangerous training will only be done under supervision."

What? No! "But sensei—"

The pleased squint becomes a mild glare. "No buts. That goes for the boys too, just so you know."

Oh great, so they'll be pissed at her too! Sakura flounders for an argument but Kakashi-sensei is kind of looming and it's hard to coalesce her thoughts into something meaningful when she's pinned with such an unrelenting stare.

"Fine," she mutters, jaw jutting out defiantly. "What counts as *dangerous?"* May as well establish boundaries.

(So she can figure out how to sneakily cross them.)

He gazes at her, and Sakura has the rather distinct feeling that he can read her like a book. "Meditating, taijutsu, sparring, it's all fine," he allows. *"Within reason.* Unless I'm around, no more hanging from trees while practicing sensory enhancement. Pick one."

Sakura nods gamely. "No more trees, got it." But he *didn't* say no more hanging from buildings or cliffs or—

"Or any other tall things," Kakashi-sensei adds, eye narrowing.

Sakura deflates. "Yes, sensei," she grumbles.

The happy eye is back. “Good girl.”

Ugh.

Sensei to the rescue! He finally got his thunder back after the Tora incident ;) Also, please bear with Sasuke and his emotional stuntedness...he might seem a little dickish for a bit, but I promise this is a pro-Sasuke fic. I love mine little emo childe.

I hope you enjoyed! And a thousand virtual high-fives to anyone who catches the Watership Down reference. Kind of a weird thing to ref in a nart fic, but WD is one of my favorite novels.

I appreciate feedback, and any and all kudos and/or comments are dearly loved. I don't have a beta so please point out any mistakes!

Next time: are you tired of training montages yet? I hope not, because Sakura has plenty of work to do. Enter: the ninken!

LDK

Chapter 3: LDK

Welcome back!

Thank you so much for all of the kind comments and kudos. You are all so SWEET!! Every time I get a notification that someone has commented, I smile so big. Seriously, it makes my day. I'm very happy you guys are enjoying my characterization of Sakura!

Chapter 3: we finally meet the ninken! And yes, more training...I promise the actual plot will pick up in the next few chapters!

Also, a quick definition in regards to the chapter title:

"LDK": LDK is an abbreviation frequently used in the world of Japanese real estate to describe apartments. It stands for Living, Dining and Kitchen area, and is preceded by the number of rooms.

Enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

True to her word, Sakura refrains from engaging in dangerous training while unsupervised.

Less true to her word, Sakura takes some liberty with the definition of “unsupervised.”

For example, the very next evening, Sakura is hanging upside down from the ceiling in her bedroom, practicing sensory tenketsu enhancement. Sure, there’s no one in the room with her, and the door is closed, and her parents are asleep, but *technically* there are

two authority figures within a shout's distance. Not to mention, the plush bed beneath her is an excellent crash pad.

All in all, Sakura thinks it's a pretty clever solution. Underneath the underneath and all that.

An interesting discovery that Sakura has made thus far is that tenketsu do not seem to be created equal–that is, some are more easily maintained than others. Vision enhancement is the most difficult, then major organs, and finally followed by musculature. The physiological cause of this disparity is unclear to her. The amount of chakra required to open the various tenketsu are similar enough, but the amount of focus it takes to keep the correct amount of chakra flowing through them is quite different.

Frustratingly, her chakra and anatomy book largely glosses over this, for reasons that Sakura can only imagine. She reckons it has something to do with how fiercely clans guard their kekkei-genkai secrets, which frankly just seems ridiculous. It's not like eyeball tenketsu are proprietary to the Hyūga, they just happen to be predisposed to having freakishly endowed ones.

The best way Sakura can come up with to describe the disparity is *shape* . If the tenketsu in her arms are a small bucket, then the eye tenketsu are a strangely-shaped shallow plate. They might be able to hold the same volume of chakra, but the focus and balance it takes to keep all of that energy safely inside the confines of their respective vessels is considerably different.

It's not a perfect explanation (and probably far from anatomically accurate) but it helps her visualize the challenge at hand, which in turn helps with execution.

She falls asleep dreaming of swimming in a giant puddle of glowing, green chakra.

The next morning, Sakura practically skips to the bridge, she's so giddy. She'd managed to keep her eye tenketsu open for multiple

intervals of five seconds (with several minutes of rest in between, but whatever) and no nose-bleeds either. Between that and her surety that Kakashi-sensei is going to teach them something new today, her mood is positively sunny.

So sunny, in fact, that when hour after hour crawls by with no sign of their teacher, Sakura is only annoyed instead of feeling volcanically furious.

Naruto and Sasuke-kun are not so forgiving, however.

“That pervy loser!” Naruto shrieks when they hit the four hour mark, shaking a fist at the stubbornly empty bridge. “At this rate, I’m gonna die of old age before I become Hokage!”

Sasuke-kun snorts. “You were never going to become Hokage anyway, dead-last,” he says rather unkindly, in Sakura’s opinion.

Sasuke-kun can be so mean sometimes, she thinks with a frown. Then she blinks, startled at the mental rebuke of her crush. Any further thoughts on that matter are summarily cut short, however, when a *poof* of smoke startles her so badly she nearly falls off of the post she’s seated on.

The boys freeze in the middle of trying to literally strangle one another (a contest that Naruto is winning thanks to the grip he’s able to get on Sasuke-kun’s huge collar) and whip around, eager to turn their ire on Kakashi-sensei.

However, there is still no Kakashi-sensei, because the smoke clears to reveal…a *pug?*

“Yo,” the dog greets, which earns no response other than three gaping mouths.

Sakura gawks. What in the *world?* He’s clearly not a pet, but Sakura can’t recall Inuzuka dogs ever speaking. The dog is sporting a

Konoha headband and a vest with a *henohenomoheji* on the back, like the kind you might see on a scarecrow.

Except this is no cornfield, and the pug is *talking.*

“You can *talk?”* Naruto demands, pointing an accusatory finger at the new arrival.

“Of course I can talk,” the pug says boredly with a slow blink, and it’s so reminiscent of her sensei that suddenly everything clicks into place.

“You belong to Kakashi-sensei, don’t you?” she asks, sliding off her post to trot closer.

The pug harrumphs, but he’s smirking a little bit too. “Kakashi said the pink one would be clever,” he notes. “I’m Pakkun. I’m a ninken, and one of Kakashi’s summons. You may call me Pakkun-sensei, or Pakkun-sama.”

Sakura magnanimously decides to ignore being referred to as *the pink one* in favor of basking in the compliment of her cleverness. However, there still remains the issue of their absent team leader.

“Pakkun-sensei, where is Kakashi-sensei?” she asks, internally wondering if their teacher had become so accustomed to leaving Team 7 to their own devices that he’d simply be fobbing off his responsibilities onto his summons from now on.

The thought rankles, but is marginally soothed by the fact that he’s evidently abandoned all three of them, and not just her.

“He was called away on a mission,” Pakkun-sensei reports, swiftly dispatching that theory.

Sakura internally cringes a bit at her presumptuous judgment. *Oops. Sorry, sensei.*

Beside her, Naruto crosses his arms with a stomp. “Why couldn’t we go on the mission too?” he demands, causing Sakura to outwardly roll her eyes, but inwardly agree, just a little.

Pakkun-sensei is unmoved. “Because it’s an S-rank mission, and you’re a bunch of brats.”

Sakura can’t help but huff amusedly at Naruto’s wordless shrieks of indignation. He does everything with such energy and sincerity, she muses. It’s obnoxious, but also kind of entertaining, in the same way that a tiny kitten puffing up and growling is entertaining.

(But the day Sakura reveals that sentiment to a living soul is the day hell freezes over.)

“What does that mean for us?” Sasuke-kun inquires in his signature monotone.

“It means,” Pakkun-sensei raises a paw officiously. “That until Kakashi returns, I am your team leader. You follow my orders. Is that understood?”

Sakura is the only one that nods in the affirmative. “When will Kakashi-sensei get back?”

Pakkun-sensei shrugs, and Sakura is momentarily struck by how *human* the action is. It’s strange.

“At least a few days, could be a week. Could be two weeks.”

Well, that’s supremely unhelpful.

Although…if Kakashi-sensei is out of town, that means he’s not around to witness any potentially *(allegedly)* dangerous training, or be a fussbudget about it. No holding back, no limits…this could be the perfect opportunity to get started on learning the body flicker.

Sakura very carefully does not allow her glee to curl her lips into a smile, but it’s a near thing. Instead, she nods calmly in

understanding.

“I see. What’s on the docket today, sensei?”

“Your first mission is,” the ninken begins with the utmost gravitas, and Sakura can feel both Naruto Sasuke-kun perk up in attention behind her. As one, they lean forward in anticipation.

“...giving me an ear-rub!”

Team 7 deflates like popped party balloons.

“Ehhhh,” Naruto whines at the same time Sasuke-kun says, “This is stupid.”

Sakura is a little weirded out but it’s not like she’s got anything better to do, so she simply nods and waits for further instruction. Besides, ninja or not, Pakkun is still a pug, and therefore adorable…and spending the morning petting a cute dog is hardly far up on the list of hardships.

Before Pakkun-sensei can continue, Sasuke turns and begins to leave without another word.

Sakura takes an aborted step after him. “Wait, Sasuke-kun, where are you going?”

He neither turns nor stops. “To train on my own. I don’t need help from a dog.”

Sakura blinks owlishly at the disdain in his voice.

So rude…!

She turns to look expectantly at Naruto, hopeful for a better attitude out of him. To her dismay, however, Naruto is gazing after Sasuke with what looks like mounting agitation and is shifting on his feet. He looks back and forth between the receding form of his teammate and their interim sensei a few times, before dashing after Sasuke.

“Wait up, bastard!” he calls. “Let’s spar!”

They leave.

Sakura stares after them, feeling disappointment pool like ice in her belly. *Left behind…again.*

She turns slowly back to Pakkun-sensei, who is gazing at her placidly.

“I’m sorry about them sensei,” she mutters, trying to steel herself for the impending rejection. There’s no way he’ll want to bother training just her alone. Even ninken probably have responsibilities, she thinks.

But he simply waves a dismissive paw. “Eh, their loss. Alright, let’s get to it.”

He begins trotting towards the training grounds.

Sakura blinks and then hurries to catch up with him. “Sensei…? What about the, uh…mission?”

Pakkun-sensei chuckles, which is *such* a bizarre sound to come from a dog that Sakura can only blink, mystified.

“We’ve got some other business to attend to first. Come!”

Sakura follows her four-legged sensei dutifully, noting that they do not go the same direction that her teammates went earlier, and instead veer off towards training ground six. As all of her prior experience has been at training ground three, Sakura curiously takes in the novel scenery.

Unlike three, which hosts a relatively small clearing flanked by forests and river, training ground six is a huge, open field lush with waist-high canary grass. For a ninja, the lack of overhead cover and the potential for enemies to be lurking in the brush should be a little unnerving, but the sheer bucolic beauty of it far outweighs any

misgivings Sakura might have. It's *gorgeous.* It makes her want to flop down in the grass and watch the clouds amble by.

Sakura is distracted by a cloud that kind of looks like Sasuke-kun's spiky hair when she almost trips over Pakkun-sensei, who has stopped. She hops backward, an apology forming on her lips, but the sound of approaching thunder draws her attention elsewhere.

No, not thunder…

At least not of the storm and lightning variety. No, it is a thundering of footsteps…or… *paws?*

Indeed, a veritable pack of hounds is cresting a grassy hill not far from her, and rapidly growing closer by the second. Sakura can only stare as they approach.

"Pakkun-sensei?" she asks, taking a step backwards.

He says nothing.The thundering grows louder. She can count two, three, five, no… *seven* dogs coming her way!

"...sensei?" The pitch of Sakura's voice rises with her panic, and the pack of beasts has nearly reached them. Is she about to get mauled to death in some sort of doggie turf war?! Sakura would draw a weapon to fight, but she *loves* dogs and would sooner die than hurt one, ninken or not.

What a way to go, she despairs. *Avenge me, Sasuke-kun!*

Finally, the hounds are upon her, and Sakura goes toppling backwards into the grass, besieged on all sides by snuffling noses and slobbery kisses. She shrieks with surprised laughter, shocked by the sudden, intensely cheerful greeting, and proceeds to then rub every ear and scritch every chin she can get her greedy hands on. A huge, bulldog-looking canine flops his entire bodyweight onto her, knocking the breath from her lungs.

It's *delightful.*

"Alright, alright, let her up."

Pakkun-sensei's gravelly voice cuts through the din of excited dog noises, and Sakura soon finds herself bereft of her new furry friends. She frowns. The bulldog eventually relinquishes his seat on Sakura's chest and she sits up, only to get a lapful of what kind of looks like Naruto in canine-form.

"I'm Guruko!" the dog barks up at her with a cheery nod. "You smell nice!"

"Hello," she greets, feeling bewildered but giddy. "I'm Sakura, it's nice to meet you."

"I'm Bull," says the one who was sitting on her chest.

"Bisuke, here!"

"I'm Shiba! Nice to meet ya!"

"Hm. I'm Akino."

"Yo! The name's Urushi."

"My name is Uhei, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Sakura reels from the onslaught of new names and cuteness. Every dog is wearing a vest adorned with the *henohenomoheji* and a Konoha headband. She's certain these are all Kakashi's ninken, which means they could probably kill her in a blink, but she just wants to squeeze all of them into her arms and smother them with kisses.

(Is it obvious her parents never let her have a dog as a child, despite her desperate pleas for one?)

“You probably guessed this already, but we’re all summons of Kakashi,” Pakkun-sensei says, sweeping a paw towards his compatriots. “He asked us to keep an eye on all of his brats, but it looks like you’re the only one who will be receiving our superior tutelage.”

Sakura could squeal with joy, but she refrains. Special training from Kakashi-sensei’s ninken! And her two teammates are going to miss out because they were too quick to judge…she considers for a moment telling Sasuke-kun, certain it would gain her some favor, but mentally trashes that thought just as quickly. Sasuke-kun is probably better off on his own, she reasons. He’s so smart and self-sufficient, he’d probably get bored quickly. Really, she’s doing him a favor by shouldering the burden of this training…

Sakura snaps out of her thoughts when she realizes Pakkun-sensei is looking at her expectantly.

“Y-yes, sensei! Starting today, I am in your care.” She bows low enough that her hair almost brushes her feet.

“Until you’re instructed otherwise, meet here every morning at seven sharp. You will train until ten, and then you and I will run missions together until I get bored or you pass out. Understood?”

Sakura gulped. *Pass out…?* That doesn’t sound good.

But she nods anyway. “Yes, sensei.”

“Good. Now, go grab that stick over there.”

Sakura’s gaze follows the indication of his paw, and finds a stick that’s nearly as long as she is tall, though it’s not very thick. Confused, but not willing to disappoint her sensei(s) thirty seconds into her special training, she trots over and snatches it up obediently.

“What now, sensei?” she asks, gripping the stick tightly in both hands. Are they going to teach her how to fight with a *stick?* It

doesn't make any sense. Sakura's proficiency with staff weapons is poor enough to be totally negligible, and she can think of a thousand areas of training that their time would be better spent improving.

"Playing fetch, obviously."

And that's how Sakura ends up spending the afternoon trying to toss her stick (which is really more like a branch) as far she can manage so the ninken can chase it.

With her poor physical strength, however, the stick barely goes a few meters. None of the ninken even bother going after it, and she's forced to sullenly retrieve it herself every time.

"Sensei," she huffs after her thirteenth attempt. "I already do physical conditioning in the morning. Wouldn't it make more sense to practice my taijutsu than do…this?" She gestures lamely with the branch.

He stares at her for a moment before he sighs. "Sakura, you're a ninja, and a clever brat. *Think."*

Sakura blinks, and then scowls. "I should use chakra," she realizes, feeling like an absolute moron. Of *course* there's more to this exercise than just throwing a dumb stick around.

"Kakashi said you've got excellent control and have already started messing around with sensory enhancement, so giving your arms or legs a boost should be a piece of cake."

Sakura's brain latches on to only one part of that sentence. "Kakashi-sensei said I have excellent control?" she repeats, feeling pride swell like a warm bubble in her chest.

Pakkun-sensei's flat stare in response tells her exactly what he thinks of her fishing for compliments. "Yup. Now prove him right."

Sakura hurries to do so.

She thinks back to Noguchi-sensei's guide and the meditation scroll. Summoning her chakra into her arms is easy, but she has a feeling that just flooding her muscles with it will do more harm than good. She could probably seriously injure herself if she's not careful. Mildly chakra-enhanced strength or speed is a common shinobi skill, but repeated or complex movements require more than just simple muscle reinforcement. Furthermore, she needs to be precise with how much she uses, or she'll wring herself dry in a matter of moments.

It'll take practice, Sakura muses, just like the tree-walking. But she is quite confident that it will be muscle-memory (or chakra-memory?) in no time at all.

She starts by slowly going through the motions of throwing the stick without actually releasing it, and the activity immediately reveals to her that it will require far more than just some imprecise boost to her arms alone. The motion of the throw can be broken down into simple parts: raise arms, step forward, begin to swing arms, follow through with the hips, and release. She'll need to augmeny her core muscles and back, both shoulder girdles and all of the muscles and ligaments down to her fingertips. Her legs will require reinforcement too, unless she wants to fall over mid-throw. Even her *toes* play a part, curling into her sandals to grip and balance.

The difficulty of strength enhancement truly comes down to the intended power level, Sakura realizes. If she only wants to give her body a little bitty boost, she could do so with fairly lax concentration. There isn't much risk for tissue damage or major chakra loss, so a vague shove into her tenketsu should suffice. But if she wants to *seriously* power up her muscles, like the legendary Tsunade who can level mountains with a single fist…she will need to be far more careful and much more aware of her anatomy.

No wonder there aren't many shinobi with supremely enhanced strength like the Slug Sannin…it's freaking *hard.* It makes her wonder about the difference between circulating chakra for adhesion versus a strength power-up, too. Why is chakra-adhesion generally

simpler to accomplish? Perhaps it's related to the fact that adhesion doesn't really involve her own tissue, beyond needing it to touch whatever requires adhering to. It's more of an abstract concept than a physical imposition, she muses. Does that mean chakra responds to *intent?* What a strange idea.

"Any day now," Pakkun-sensei says, though his voice is amused.

Sakura realizes that she's been staring down at the stick in her hands with an expression of severe concentration and consciously tries to relax her face. It's probably the same one that scared the grocery recipient the other day. She smiles a bit at the memory.

It's a habit of hers, Sakura knows. Her mama will sometimes comment on how deeply furrowed her brow becomes during intense thought.

"My little monkey," she'll say, smoothing out the wrinkled skin with a fingertip.

Slowly, Sakura begins introducing chakra into the throwing motion, though she still keeps the branch in her hands. It takes several minutes and two-dozen mimings of a throw, but eventually she feels pretty comfortable with the required path for her chakra.

Whew. Sakura is exhausted and she hasn't even thrown the damn thing yet. Abruptly, she's very grateful for already having some chakra meditation practice under her belt. Otherwise this would have taken much, *much* longer.

The thought of her progress makes Sakura grin. Circulating her chakra is already beginning to feel more instinctual than calculated, which is just so *freaking cool!* Sure, getting to the point of being able to thoughtlessly boost her strength or speed at a whim will take training (*so* much training, she's certain) but it's possible.

She can do it! *Her!* Sakura! Little civilian-born Sakura is going to become faster than the Yondaime and stronger than Tsunade, she

knows it.

“Okay,” she mutters to herself, adjusting her grip on the branch. This time, she’s going to throw it for real.

Inhale.

She summons her chakra.

Exhale.

Go!

With a mighty roar, Sakura hurls the stick as hard as she can. At least one ninken gasps behind her.

The branch soars in an impressive arc, whirling so quickly that it almost looks like a blurry, brown shuriken. It goes and goes and *goes* , so much further than Sakura could have ever imagined, before finally returning to earth. Sakura isn’t an expert at estimating distances, but she’d guess that it flew at least fifty meters. And that wasn’t even her full power!

Sakura leaps into the air with a joyful shout, then finds herself nearly knocked over by the herd of dogs thundering past. She can hear them yelping and barking excitedly as they race after the stick, and can’t help but laugh in delight.

“Bring it here, boys!” she hollers, waving both arms. Who knew training could be so fun?

Fetch lasts another hour before Pakkun-sensei calls it a day. Sakura is bone-tired and beyond sore, but utterly pleased regardless. At full-power, she could throw the branch a solid one-hundred meters, and managed to do so three times before tiring. If she wasn’t so exhausted, she would try out an enhanced punch on a training post. As it is, she can barely move one foot in front of the other.

Bull, who had been the ninken to successfully retrieve the stick more often than not, bestows upon her a *very* slobbery kiss to show his gratitude. Sakura is so sweaty and grimy that she doesn't care.

They part ways on the edge of the training field. "Thank you very much for today," Sakura says sincerely and with a deep bow. "I'm looking forward to training again tomorrow!"

Sakura can't move.

No, really. She can't.

"Ow," Sakura whines, trying once again to heave herself out of bed. She's so, *so* sore. Every muscle in her body feels like it was wound up with a wrench, beaten black and blue, and then stomped on for good measure. Her toe muscles are sore, for crying out loud!

In fact, wrestling her cheongsam on is so arduous and painful that Sakura wonders if she's actually dying. *Killed from throwing a stick too hard,* she thinks sourly. It tracks.

Finally, after some stretching and probably more anti-inflammatories than her stomach lining should probably handle, Sakura feels capable of leaving her house. Slowly, but still. Moving her body does help reduce the soreness, and she makes her way to training ground six at a (somewhat) reasonable pace.

What awaits her is eight bright-eyed ninken and an even bigger branch.

"Come on, pup," Pakkun-sensei barks. "Hop to it!"

Though he'd said the day before that she would train until ten, they only play fetch for a little over an hour before Pakkun-sensei tells her to stop.

When she inquires as to why, he stares at her like she's grown two heads. Then he says, "You're trembling," and gestures at the stick in her hands that is indeed shaking like a leaf that it perhaps once grew.

When she only looks back in confusion, he sighs. "The goal is to make you stronger, not run you into the ground."

Sakura only grips the branch tighter. She really wants to improve a lot while Kakashi-sensei is away, and she's certain that Naruto and Sasuke-kun wouldn't quit over a little trembling.

Pakkun-sensei snorts. "Kakashi said you'd be stubborn about this, too," he comments with a shake of his head. "Come. The rest of your training today will be on how to provide the best ear rubs."

After a beat, Sakura follows him up a small grassy knoll. The other ninken are already up there, busily selecting the most choice patch of grass to recline on. It's clearly serious business. Sakura waits until they're settled and then chooses a spot right in the middle. Immediately, three dogs attempt to crawl onto her lap.

Sakura giggles. *Alright, maybe taking a break isn't such a bad idea* , she thinks. Guruko (who really does remind her of Naruto) gets the first ear rub, followed by Shiba. Akino and Urushi both prefer chin scritches while Bull and Bisuke are partial to belly-rubs. Ūhei, she learns, is not actually a huge fan of being petted and rather enjoys laying with his side pressed against her back or leg, an arrangement that she is more than happy to oblige. Pakkun-sensei calls himself an all-pets-opportunist with no real preference, but Sakura knows that in truth his favorite is having the bridge of his short snout gently stroked with one finger.

After about an hour of very cozy snoozing, Sakura finally rouses herself enough to ask Pakkun-sensei a question.

"Any missions today, sensei?"

He opens one eye, looking so much like Kakashi-sensei that Sakura grins.

“Yeah, we’ll be starting one that should last a few days.”

Sakura perks up at that. Surely, they won’t be leaving the village without Kakashi-sensei? It must be some tedious D-rank, then. Ugh.

And sure enough he continues, “Our client’s apartment needs to be cleaned.”

“And you think this will take *days?”* Sakura asks, aghast. How filthy can an apartment be that it requires multiple days to clean?

Sakura voices that thought out loud, but Pakkun-sensei only shrugs noncommittally. “You’ll find out.”

Sakura scowls. *Lovely.*

After a few more minutes of dozing, they head back into the city proper. However, when Sakura begins making her way to the Hokage tower (and thus, the missions desk), Pakkun-sensei herds her in a different direction.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says in response to her questioning look. “This way.”

Obediently, Sakura follows the ninken into a neighborhood she’s never been to before. It’s pretty quiet, with a mix of civilians and shinobi milling about, and consists mostly of apartment buildings with small businesses on the first floor. A cute clothing boutique and a secondhand bookstore both catch her eye, and she makes a mental note to come back and check those out later.

Finally, they seem to reach their destination, pulling up to a very average-looking apartment complex. It’s four-stories of reinforced concrete and dark blue roofing. Some of the units have small

balconies. It seems…terribly idyll, and Sakura wonders what horrors await behind such a boring facade.

She waits for the order to go inside. However, instead of buzzing in through the main door, the dogs head into the alleyway with the confidence of canines who have been here before.

Sakura's eyes narrow. *This is beginning to look a little suspicious…*

She trails after them anyway. It's not like standing around and gawking in the middle of the street is going to solve the mystery.

To her surprise, the ninken begin scaling the side of the building, using a path haphazardly constructed of balconies, power lines, awnings, and piping. It's clearly a well-established path and a well-known journey to the ninken, which only makes Sakura's curiosity burn even brighter. Cautiously she follows suit, though she forgoes their route in favor of scuttling straight up the wall with chakra. Sakura watches as Pakkun-sensei hops onto a large flower box underneath a fourth story window and then presses his paw against the frame. There's no visual result, but Sakura can feel a tiny shiver of chakra as whatever seal was on the window is broken.

Pakkun-sensei pushes the window open with that same paw and disappears inside. One by one the other ninken follow, and then Sakura is left alone, glued to the side of a building and utterly bewildered.

Shiba's head pops back into view. "You comin'?"

"Yes!" Sakura hurries to do so, but pauses before she trusts the window box with her full body weight. Then again, it could handle Bull, and she's certain the ninken weighs more than her. With a gulp, she scrambles to crouch on the box, and peers curiously into the apartment.

It looks…like an apartment. A shinobi's apartment certainly, but there's nothing particularly disgusting about it. There's some clutter,

a few books and kunai strewn about, and what looks like a pile of unfolded clean laundry. It might be a tad dusty. Overall, it does not occur to Sakura as a dwelling that will take days to clean.

So that means there's something fishy about it.

She squints, looking closer, and begins to catalog. It's of an average quality but decently sized. Wooden floors, and the walls are an attractive light green. This must be the bedroom window, because she can see a full-sized bedframe and mattress with a cute, shuriken-printed duvet. There's a small desk tucked into the corner. More books. One plant.

A sliver of the kitchen is visible through a pair of sliding doors, and she's pretty sure there's a living room too. *Damn,* she thinks. *A whole LDK. Swanky.*

It's a perfectly nice apartment. Honestly, the only thing disturbing her right now is the familiarity with which the ninken are moving about it. Bull, Urushi and Shiba have disappeared into the kitchen, and the other dogs are now lounging about on the floor and bed or heading for the living room.

Sakura looks down.

Beneath the window is a short bookshelf, and on top of that bookshelf is a small doormat. It says *Please wipe your paws!* and is decorated with little pawprints.

Uhhh. "Pakkun-sensei," she begins, feeling her anxiety percolate.

Then Sakura notices the first *henohenomoheji* scrawled on a piece of paper on the bookshelf. Then she notices another on a poster on the wall. Suddenly, she's seeing them everywhere.

Oh, sage.

This is, without a shadow of a doubt, Kakashi-sensei's apartment.

Pakkun-sensei wuffs at her from his spot on the duvet. “What are you waiting for? It ain’t gonna clean itself!”

Sakura bites her lip, gingerly descends from the window sill into the apartment, and is promptly hit in the face with something very cold and very wet.

Sputtering, Sakura swipes at her eyes. *Is this…paint?!*

Sakura looks down in horror at her dress. It’s spattered *(ruined!)* with the bright blue pigment, which is dripping down onto the floor. The floor that she’s, you know, supposed to be cleaning.

What the hell?! Sakura is working herself up into quite the shriek of rage when Pakkun-sensei appears in front of her, a towel clamped in his teeth.

“Lesson number one in trap detection and disabling,” he barks, dropping the rag at her feet. “Look *before* you leap.”

Haha I know several of y'all wanted more Kakashi...he's coming, I promise! In the meantime, indirect Kakashi via his ninken and apartment lol. And yes, team seven bonding is also imminent.

Any feedback is always loved <3

Next time: Sakura learns how to use her sniffer like a pro, and gets a makeover.

Also, I made some doodles about what I think it looks like when Sakura uses her vision enhancement. I imagine that her pupils dilate like CRAZY so she can see more, kinda like cats when they go into silly mode lol.

[img:
https://64.media.tumblr.com/22e0c988a85f8e9594eab21215e467ef/1cc34545821b4426-

26/s2048x3072/43664b0d33c0b86e3d7660b034a6c65181952832.jpg]

[img:
https://64.media.tumblr.com/0ed2a17005a8a46413bdbfbed29d27dc/1cc34545821b4426-96/s2048x3072/e8ab03d925fb28ca0e113a178dfee352e42dc388.jpg]

Move with intent

Chapter 4: Move with intent

I know I say this every time, but thank you so much for all of the love on this story!! I'm almost at 3k views and over 300 kudos... you're all wonderful and amazing and I cherish your kind comments especially. Thank you!

This chapter is nearly 8k, with plenty of ninken-y goodness, more of my chakra lore, and Sakura being Sakura.

I hope you enjoy! This is still unbetaed, so feel free to point out any mistakes!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The second lesson of trap detection and disabling is: there’s always another where that one came from.

Or, two seconds after the blue paint, something literally explodes over Sakura’s head, raining down what looks like paper confetti. Upon closer inspection, each piece of paper has a little henohenomoheji on it.

In that moment, Sakura gets her first real taste of bloodlust.

*I’m going to **kill him!***

The sentiment must be obvious on her face, because Pakkun-sensei waves a vaguely conciliatory paw and says, “No need to look so serious. It’ll wash out.”

No it won’t! Sakura wants to wail. She can tell just from looking at it that the paint is extremely oily. Even if she can miraculously get the

blue pigment out, the oil stains will likely remain. And this is her favorite outfit too…The cheongsam was a gift from her mama and she always thought it made up a cute-yet-functional shinobi getup. Thankfully, her spandex shorts seem to be mostly spared, but the dress is definitely a lost cause.

She sighs. “Is anything else going to immediately assault me or can I change out of this?”

If Sakura really has to clean this place, she’s sure as hell not going to make it harder by adding to the mess.

Pakkun-sensei pauses, looking extremely uncomfortable as she fidgets with her zipper. *Serves him right.* Then he grumbles, “Stay there,” and trots over to the pile of (hopefully clean) laundry. He pulls a large white tee-shirt from the pile and drags it back over to her.

“This okay?” he asks, and Sakura nods.

She waits until he (and the rest of the ninken) turn around to undress. Pakkun-sensei might be a dog, but he’s still a *boy* dog.

Sakura uses both her dress and the rag he’d brought over earlier to wipe the worst of the paint and paper from her upper body before pulling the shirt on. “This better not make me break out,” she mutters, swiping at her cheeks. At least Kakashi-sensei’s shirt is getting ruined too.

Of course there’s a henohenomoheji printed on the shirt as well.

Sakura snorts. “He’s really leaning into his namesake, huh,” she muses. For all of his strange aloofness and incomprehensible decorum, Kakashi-sensei clearly has a sense of humor.

“He’s an odd one,” Pakkun-sensei intones sagely.

Sakura can’t help but grin a little bit at the thought of her eccentric sensei, and hopes his mission is going alright. “Yeah, he is.”

She gives the shirt one last perfunctory tug and looks at Pakkun-sensei expectantly. “What’s lesson three, sensei?”

“We’ll get to that. You’ve had some practice enhancing your senses, correct?” He jumps back onto the bed and settles comfortably onto the duvet.

Sakura nods. “Yes, mostly my vision.”

“That’s the trickiest one, but you won’t be using it much here.” At her questioning look he continues, “Traps are meant to be hidden from all of the senses, but first and foremost, sight. You’ll have a much quicker time finding them using your nose or ears.”

Sakura blinks. That makes sense. If she only had a few minutes to set up a trap, her first and second objectives would be to make sure it works, and then make sure it isn’t blatantly obvious to the naked eye. Things like masking its smell would be tertiary, though certainly desirable.

“Now, what can you smell?”

Dutifully, Sakura summons her chakra to her olfactory system and then *immediately* regrets it. The acrid, oily odor from the paint is overwhelming and nearly sends her to her knees.

Yuck! It’s awful, like someone shoved an old paint can up her nose. Not to mention the instant headache! The scent dredges up memories of when her parents had the house painted (her mama hated the color) and of art lessons during the academy (the point of which she will never fathom). The memories are intense and shockingly clear, which is curious. Sakura knows that olfaction is the sense most closely linked with memory, so perhaps enhancing the sense of smell can sharpen retrospection?

It’s a concept worth pursuing, and she makes a mental note to do so later.

Regardless, Sakura feels a pang of sympathy for any creatures with a stronger sense of smell. She can only imagine how noxious the world is to them.

Then again…if they can withstand it, perhaps Sakura can too. She just needs to acclimate.

You got this. Shannaro!

Sakura maintains the chakra flow for several more painful moments, and finally the odor begins to subside in its intensity. Her shoulders loosen and she shakes her head like a dog ridding its fur of water. *Ugh.*

“Good,” Pakkun-sensei praises. “You got through the worst part. Again, what can you smell?”

Sakura inhales tentatively. Still mostly paint, but also, “Cedarwood?” she ventures, letting her eyes fall shut. “Clean laundry. Old books. I think he needs to take his trash out. Dog.”

“What else?”

Sakura’s face scrunches up as she concentrates. Is there anything else? Maybe, but it’s honestly hard to discern any one thing clearly. All of the scents are so intense and co-mingling, and it’s not like her palette is going to be particularly refined already. It all just smells like Kakashi-sensei (except for the trash).

She inhales more deeply this time, consciously trying to ignore the strongest odors, like *paint* and *dog* .

But…there’s something sharper too. It’s extremely faint. A little sweet, with a hint of hydrogen peroxide or chlorinated water. The more she focuses on it, the clearer the scent becomes.

Sakura describes the odor to Pakkun-sensei and he growls approvingly. “That’s the scent of Kakashi’s chakra.”

Her eyes pop open at that. *“Really?”* Chakra has a specific scent? She had no idea!

“Lesson number three: the nose knows. Everyone’s chakra smells a bit different, though it usually reflects their nature affinity to some degree.”

Kakashi-sensei must be a lightning type then, she realizes. There’s hints of burnt metal, too.

“Fascinating,” Sakura breathes, enthralled by the idea. She takes several more deep sniffs, trying to carve out Kakashi-sensei’s scent in perfect clarity. “What does mine smell like?”

“Moss and fresh rain,” Pakkun-sensei tells her, which is actually quite pleasing. She’s kind of glad it’s not cherry blossoms.

“Most traps involve chakra somehow, whether it’s sealing or a genjutsu to disguise the trap,” Pakkun-sensei explains. “Unless the shinobi setting up the trap is a seal master, chances are there will be traces you can smell, especially if it had to be set up quickly.”

He gestures to the room at large. “Of course, Kakashi has had plenty of time to conceal these traps and make them difficult to find, but there are a few tricks to it.”

Sakura is nodding eagerly, delighted at the influx of knowledge. The paint in her hair is all but forgotten.

“The most common trap is a seal that contains a weapon that will be fired at the victim when triggered,” he continues, miming what Sakura assumes to be a kunai being sprung from a trap. “Typically, seals are triggered by movement, pressure, and-or foreign chakra signatures. When a seal is activated, the scent of chakra will spike, and if you react quickly enough you might be able to partially or even fully disarm the trap before it springs, or at least dodge.”

Sage, she wishes she had a notebook or something to write this all down!

“Some traps will also have an audible activation, so it’s important to use your nose *and* ears.” He gestures to his own. “Exploding tags are an exception, since they’re usually purchased and not handmade. They won’t smell like the trapper’s chakra, but there will be a brief smell of sulfur and usually a hissing or clicking noise before they explode. Honestly, they’re one of the easier traps to find.”

Sakura gulps. “Exploding tags…?” She’s not gonna get blown up in her own sensei’s apartment, right?

Pakkun-sensei snorts. “Don’t worry, I already disabled all of the lethal traps,” he says, accurately reading her tone.

Sakura nods, not feeling particularly reassured, and then says, “Pakkun-sensei, you really know a lot about this stuff.”

He stares at her, apparently nonplussed. “Well, I am a tracker,” he grumbles. “Many of my first years as Kakashi’s summon were spent sniffing out traps in the field during the war.”

She blinks at that. “But…Kakashi-sensei was my age during the war,” she replies, feeling a dread pool in her belly. “Was he really on the frontlines?”

Pakkun-sensei shrugs. “That’s war for ya.”

Sakura only hums in response to that. The information changes her perspective of her teacher somewhat. No wonder the man was prone to strange whimsy; life must seem far too short to be spent worrying about things like formality or pretension. He probably—no, undoubtedly—saw countless friends die, amongst other horrors. She shudders at the thought.

It makes Sakura wonder what he thinks of her, conscious as she is about her appearance. Vanity seems ridiculous in the face of death, probably. Does he think less of her, because she enjoys things like makeup and beauty? Then again, she reasons, if life is too short to live by other's expectations, then as long as it doesn't inhibit her ability to be a good shinobi, she should be able to enjoy those sorts of things without shame. She can be pretty *and* tough. *If Kakashi-sensei disagrees, he can shove that orange book up his—*

"Sakura?"

The thus-called genin snaps out of her thoughts with a shiver. *Right* , she thinks, trying to smooth out that frown in her brow. *I've got traps to find.*

Sakura summons her chakra to her olfactory system and gets to work. It takes several moments to acclimate to the intensified smells again, but she thinks it was a little quicker than last time. Well, maybe.

She sniffs the air, trying to find that sweet-sharp scent again. Once she does, her next few inhales are long and deep. There seem to be a few areas where the scent is stronger.

"The windows, the bed, and that bookshelf," she recites, pointing to the object on the adjacent wall.

Pakkun-sensei nods, "Correct." When she doesn't move, he says, "Don't be shy, take a closer look."

Sakura swallows and cautiously makes her way over to the bookshelf. A dying snail would probably move faster, but hey, for all she knows there are *also* chakra-free traps just waiting to spring on her. Kakashi-sensei seems like the kind of person to employ regular old trapdoors, just for the entertainment aspect of it.

Thankfully she reaches the bookshelf unharmed, but her trepidation grows the closer she gets. *Why would he trap his bookshelf,*

anyway? she wonders, scanning the shelves. Maybe there's a special code book in there somewhere? Or some top-secret intel?

Or a diary. Now that would be interesting. It's hard to imagine Kakashi-sensei scrawling his idylls and woes away in a cute little notebook, but Sage, would it be *incredible* to get that kind of dirt on him. Sakura leans in to scour the titles more closely.

Sadly, there appears to be no such thing. The bookshelf is terribly unorganized and the contents are bizarre, ranging from ancient cookbooks to music theory. Some texts are upside-down or even have the textblock facing out, and all of it is supremely dusty.

Except for one shelf.

The shelf in question is squeaky clean and the novels, neatly lined up, all appear to be in chronological order. There are multiple editions of each novel, artbooks evidently dedicated to the series, collections of analytical essays written by third-party authors, two biographies about the author…

Damn, Sakura thinks, impressed. *Kakashi-sensei must be a big fan of this*—she squints at the shelf—*this Jiraiya guy!*

The books look familiar, too. Sakura is pretty sure the orange one is the book that her sensei is always reading. Her curiosity thoroughly piqued, Sakura reaches out to grab it.

And two seconds later finds herself staring up at the ceiling with a smarting nose.

"Wha— *ow!"* Sakura cries, sitting up and clutching at her face. Her nose is bleeding!

She looks up in time to see what appears to be a boxing glove on the end of some kind of spring retract itself, disappearing behind the books.

She’d been suckerpunched.

Sakura groans and wobbles to her feet. *A spring-loaded boxing glove? What is this, a cartoon?!*

“I thought you said you disabled the dangerous traps!” she snaps, whipping around to point an accusing finger at Pakkun-sensei.

He is unperturbed. “I said I disabled the *lethal* ones,” the pug corrects blandly.

Sakura lets out a brief, wordless noise of anger and refrains from stomping her foot. Barely, but she manages it.

“Try again,” he says. “That trap resets itself. All you have to do is touch the seal and push some of your own chakra into it.”

Sakura pauses, her anger falling away in the face of an opportunity to learn. “That’s it?”

He nods and says, “That’s it. Your chakra will disrupt the flow of the chakra in the seal, and it won’t be able to complete the activation.”

“How much should I use?”

“The amount of chakra required to fully disarm a trap will vary depending on the strength and complexity of the seal,” Pakkun-sensei grumbles. “That trap is simple, so it won’t take much.”

Sakura hums, trying to get a closer look behind the books without getting too close.

“Ah,” she mutters to herself a moment later. “Duh.”

The seal is much easier to see with enhanced vision. It’s a fairly small piece of paper and hidden well behind the books, but the strokes of dark ink and burnt-wire-scented chakra emanating from it are a pretty solid tell. It appears to be alone, but Sakura is going to take that observation with a *hefty* grain of salt.

Hmm. Even with boosted speed, it'll be hard to get her hand back there in time before it activates, and she might set off other traps if she just shoves it in there carelessly. Disarming it during the reset period might work, though.

With that in mind, Sakura carefully refocuses her chakra from her eyes to her ears and nasal cavity, and reaches out for the same book.

Sure enough, the *sweet-sharp* scent suddenly burns brighter in her nose and there's a faint *pop!* before the glove comes shooting out from behind the books. Sakura evades it, feeling the breeze from the strike as it passes.

Now! Before the glove can fully retract, Sakura darts forward and nails the seal with a swift, chakra-filled poke.

The spring-like contraption seizes up as if electrocuted, and indeed there are even sparks as it sputters, convulses, and apparently dies. Finally, the glove dangles from the shelf, limp like a deceased fish.

Sakura allows herself a fist-pump for her victory. She turns to her ninken sensei, a grin on her face.

"Not bad," Pakkun-sensei allows. "One down."

Sakura waits as he appears to count on one and then two paws. "...thirteen more to go."

Oh, boy.

Several hours and thirteen traps later, Sakura has been slapped, punched, blown up (mildly, according to Pakkun-sensei), and pelted with more objects of varying levels of grossness and/or danger than she would care to remember. Her hair, usually silky and lovingly brushed to shiny perfection, has been cemented into a shape rather

reminiscent of Kakashi-sensei's own birds-nest by way of paint, confetti, and soot.

She is *filthy.* And exhausted.

And despite all of that, surprising even herself…Sakura is happy. Delighted, even.

For all of his gruffness, Pakkun-sensei is extremely experienced and actually a rather superb teacher. His explanations are straightforward and thorough, and he answers all of Sakura's questions gamely. The other ninken were also keen to chime in with their own tips and tricks, and Sakura feels that she learned more today than she did in probably most of her time at the academy.

So she staggers home, moving stiffly from equal parts soreness and the amount of dried gunk on her body, with her ruined dress in one hand and a bag full of leftover takeout in the other.

"Kakashi-sensei's treat," Pakkun-sensei had said, disappearing under the mattress and reappearing with a wad of cash between his teeth. "You like sukiyaki?"

Dinner was a raucous affair, with eight ninken plus herself, but Sakura found herself feeling right at home with the lively canines. She only wishes the rest of Team Seven could've been there, too.

The apartment, of course, was not cleaned. If anything, Sakura left it in a sorrier state than she found it, but Pakkun-sensei put any concerns about that to rest. "Don't worry," he had said. "Now you know how to safely disarm the traps. Tomorrow you'll be able to clean no problem!"

Sakura groans.

And so the next six days pass in a similarly exhausting and yet somehow very enjoyable manner. Sakura wakes and pokes at her new bruises, goes through her rudimentary exercise regimen, and

then heads to training ground six for fetch or tug-of-war. The latter, a new game intended to increase Sakura's chakra-enhancement endurance, involves a very large rope with her on one end and the ninken on the other. She loses every time, but it's closer with each match.

After morning play-time, she and Pakkun-sensei will head to the apartment, wherein she disables the old traps (and gets walloped by some new ones) and eventually does get to do some actual cleaning. Dinner is either takeout on Kakashi-sensei's coin, or cooked by Sakura (the groceries for which are also purchased with Kakashi-sensei's money). To Sakura's surprise, the ninken turn out to be capable sous chefs.

By the end of the six days, Sakura is quite pleased with her trap detection-and-disabling skills and the state of the apartment. Enhancing her senses is muscle-memory now, almost as easy as blinking or breathing. Plus, her eye tenketsu limit is now up to twelve seconds, and a boost to her hearing or sense of smell is limited only by her reserves.

Finally, she's starting to feel like a real shinobi.

"Kakashi will be back in three days," Pakkun-sensei says, apropos of nothing, as Sakura sits on the floor and finally folds that pile of clean laundry. It is the last bastion of mess in the apartment, so she supposes the timing is well enough.

"Oh?" Sakura asks, trying to hide her excitement. *Sensei is coming back!* She can't wait to show him everything she learned. "Took him long enough."

She totes the laundry over to sensei's dresser to put it away, pulling the first drawer open only a tiny bit before pausing and leaning back. Sure enough, there's a burst of chakra-scent and then a barrage of shuriken erupt from the drawer and embed themselves into the ceiling.

Sakura gapes. *Those are real!* They could have taken her eye out, or worse!

She turns to glare at Pakkun-sensei, but he does not appear to feel even a shred of contrition.

“Lesson number four: trust your instincts. You need to treat all traps from now on as if they’re lethal,” he rumbles. “Because in the field, they will be.”

Sakura scowls. It’s obnoxiously reasonable, because he’s right. She’s just glad she had the wherewithal to lean back earlier.

“Who traps their sock drawer?” she mutters to herself, putting the laundry away with more vigor than perhaps necessary.

Curiously, she hears the clink of metal. Instinctively she flinches back, trying to scent for chakra, but there’s nothing. Not a trap, then?

She digs in the drawer a little (studiously avoiding anything that might even vaguely resemble an undergarment) until she finds the source of the noise. Her prize is all the way at the bottom, buried beneath a truly absurd number of socks (none of which seem to match).

“Ooh,” she coos in admiration as she pulls out the garment. Or, garments. It’s a pair of arm guards, with black fabric that stretches from the knuckles to probably just above the elbow. There are four metal plates on each to protect the hands and forearms. Essentially, armored arm-warmers. They’re in good shape but look way too small to fit an adult.

These must be from when he was younger, she realizes, and immediately decides to steal them. After all, this week-long ordeal cost Sakura her favorite dress! Kakashi-sensei can spare a pair of armguards he can’t even use anymore. She’s also going to keep the shirt she stole, as interest. It’s a tough economy these days.

“Pakkun-sensei,” she calls, waving the armguards in the air. “I’m taking these as payment for cleaning sensei’s apartment.” She’s certain this isn’t an actual official mission either, so it’s not like there’s going to be a paycheck.

He just blinks at her. “That’s probably fine.”

It better be, because finders keepers. “I’m part of his genin team, not an indentured servant,” she grouses, pulling the arm guards on. They’re buttery soft, shockingly, and fit her perfectly. “He can’t expect this kind of work for free.”

Pakkun-sensei actually laughs at that, and says, “To be fair, this was my idea. He had no part.”

Sakura freezes. *“What?!”*

The pug stares at her like she’s grown a second head. “Did you really think he’d want some brat snooping around his apartment while he was gone? Of course he didn’t know.”

Oh, no . Sakura’s heart hammers in her chest as she reels from this revelation and her stomach roils unpleasantly.

“So…” Her throat clicks from a dry swallow. “I’ve just been invading his privacy this whole time?” she demands, feeling bizarrely like she wants to cry.

She’d thought that Kakashi-sensei wanted her to be here, like some kind of long-distance trust exercise. Now it just feels wrong and invasive and presumptuous. Sage, he might even *hate* her for this.

“Don’t worry about it,” Pakkun-sensei dismisses with a wave of his paw.

“But sensei—”

“I mean it,” he cuts her off with uncharacteristic firmness. “He might be surprised at first, but he won’t be angry. Kakashi is fond of the lot

of you, no matter what he might say."

Sakura chews on her lip, unconvinced. Being fond of someone doesn't necessarily mean you want them poking around your house for a week. Pakkun-sensei doesn't seem like the kind of dog to lie about this sort of thing, but she still feels very uncomfortable about the entire situation.

Pakkun-sensei continues with a shrug, "Besides, if he's annoyed with anyone, it'll be me. You were respectful of his belongings and he gets to come home to a clean apartment thanks to you."

It still feels yucky. "I guess…"

He sighs. "Sakura, I promise it will be fine. I did this for his benefit as much as yours. He tends to neglect his care for himself when he's got pups to look after."

Sakura glances up at that. "Really?"

Pakkun-sensei nods, and there's a rare, fond look in his eye. "You should have seen him when Urushi and Shiba were pups. He nearly ran himself ragged. Kakashi might hide it behind that dirty book of his, but he's a total mother hen."

Sakura feels a bubble of affection bloom warmly in her chest, first at the image of Urushi and Shiba as puppies, and then at the idea of Kakashi-sensei fussing over them. Her heart belongs to Sasuke-kun, but there's something about a tall man holding puppies that is just *so* universally compelling…

But then something occurs to her. "Did you say *dirty book?"*

Pakkun-sensei's gaze slides away from hers, and if he was physically capable of it Sakura is sure he would have started sweating right then. "Did I?" he responds evasively.

Sakura can’t believe her ears. “Are you telling me that sensei has been reading *porn* ,” the word is a whispered hiss, as if there might be someone around to be offended by it. “In public?!”

“I’m not telling you anything,” he denies, still not meeting Sakura’s gaze.

Unbelievable.

Shaking her head, Sakura pulls off the armguards and goes to stuff them back into the drawer. Collecting payment from an unwilling patron seems wrong, even if she is a shinobi and the patron is a shameless weirdo who reads *porn in public.*

“You know, you should keep those,” Pakkun-sensei stops her with a staying paw.

Sakura pauses but doesn’t move to take them back out. “Are you sure?” She does want them, but now it feels weird.

The returned nod is emphatic, and the fond look returns to his eyes. “Yes. He’ll be happy you’re more protected. He’d wrap you brats in bubble wrap if he could get away with it.”

“I don’t know,” she demures, even as her traitorous hands go diving back into the sock pile. Is sensei really such a mother hen as Pakkun-claims? She supposes his concern over her (supposedly) dangerous training fits with that description. Sakura had figured he just didn’t want to deal with the paperwork a dead genin would probably earn him.

The pug rolls his eyes. “Just take ‘em. You humans are so soft and squishy.”

Sakura scowls and yanks the armguards back on before knee-walking all the way over to the bed just to poke him in his furry, chubby belly. “Pot, meet kettle.”

He growls, and she pulls her hand out of the range of his lazily snapping jaws with a laugh. Having built-in defenses like fangs sure would be convenient, she muses.

Once the laundry is fully put away, Sakura pulls her sandals back on and goes to crawl out of the window. The fact that she never once actually used the door suddenly occurs to her, making her giggle. *How very shinobi-like,* she thinks wryly.

“Bye everyone!” she calls with a wave over her shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning!”

She receives a chorus of barks and *“Bye, Sakura-chan”s* with a smile before taking her leave, hopping down from the fourth floor window with practiced ease.

And now, for her most important task all week…*finding a new outfit.*

Kakashi-sensei’s stolen tee-shirt has become her de facto training clothes, but Sakura will be retiring it to pajamas as of today. Wearing his armguards to team training will probably already be a little weird at first, but that *and* the shirt would just feel creepy. It’s not like she’s trying to become a pink-haired mini-Kakashi.

So Sakura sets off in search of that clothing boutique she’d noticed during her first journey to the apartment. She can’t remember exactly where it is, but she does remember it was near a secondhand bookstore and a tea shop, and the latter might help her find it.

Sakura scents the air, trying to ignore the near-overwhelming smells of a moderately trafficked city street. She almost gags. At first all that’s discernible is asphalt and the general musk of lots of people, but the herbaceous notes of tea eventually make their way to the forefront. It brings up memories of tea-and-anmitsu outings with Ino, and of quiet nights with her father spent reading and sipping.

Off she goes. A sniff every so often proves sufficient to keep Sakura moving in the right direction, and after a few minutes and only two

false trails, she finds herself standing in front of the tea shop.

Sakura grins. Pakkun-sensei will be proud! Tracking might never become her specialty, but it's certainly a real tool in her arsenal now.

Feeling quite pleased with herself, Sakura continues her journey to the clothing boutique…

…only to find herself sidetracked by the secondhand bookstore, instead.

Old habits die hard, she thinks to herself, beelining for the reference book section. With any luck, they'll have some more of Noguchi-sensei's guides. *Five Jutsu* had been tremendously helpful for learning chakra-adhesion and Sakura is hoping to make at least a little progress on the body flicker before Kakashi-sensei returns.

Three days. I have three days.

To her delight, they have two more of his *Ultimate Dojo* series: *Five Kata to Improve Your Strength and Balance* and *Five Judo Techniques to Turn Your Foes Against Themselves* .

Sakura smiles at the awkward mouthfuls emblazoned on the covers. Noguchi-sensei's ability to title books seems to run in opposition with his ability to write them, but that's just fine. She flips through both of them briefly and is happy to find they're as equally thorough as *Five Jutsu* and illustrated with the little cartoon sensei. She also grabs a copy of *Five Jutsu,* since her loan from the library will need to be returned eventually.

There is also a fourth text, though it looks much older and is quite small. The cover is worn and a little faded and Sakura can see evidence of dog-earing. Clearly, very well loved. She plucks it from the shelf.

Kuzushi no ri

Noguchi Mamoru.

The principles of breaking balance, she recites mentally. The name *Kaoru*—the previous owner, she presumes—is penciled scratchily in the corner the first page

Huh. Unlike his *Ultimate Dojo* series, the cover is not bright nor flashy. A muted, burnt orange, it consists only of the title, his name, and a simple sketch of a kunai and Konoha hitai-ate. *I wonder if it's his first publication,* she hums, and cracks it open carefully to check.

Thankfully, there does appear to be a short blurb about Noguchi-sensei at the end, accompanied by a photo.

A photo *indeed.*

Ummm. Sakura turns beet red as she peers at the photograph, glancing around to make sure there are no witnesses to her too-keen scrutiny. It must be an earlier publication, because the young man in the picture is a handsome twenty-something, not the mustachioed samurai-grandpa depicted in *Five Jutsu.*

She manages to move her attention from Noguchi-sensei's portrait to the blurb, but just barely.

"Noguchi Mamoru was born in a small village outside of Konoha and raised by his mother, a turnip farmer and Judo hobbyist. He decided at a young age that he wanted to become a shinobi, so he could protect those precious to him. He and his mother moved to Konoha when he was six, wherein he enrolled in the Shinobi Academy. Noguchi-sensei graduated after two years, and quickly climbed the ranks, reaching jōnin status by age fifteen. He became well-known for his clever use of simple ninjutsu, and Judo mastery. Now twenty-eight, he is proud to serve his village in the Second Shinobi World War."

Sakura gazes down at the book, jaw slack. *Noguchi-sensei was fighting in the second world war when he wrote this.* It's kind of weird

to think that seemingly asinine things like book publications still happen during war, but she supposes they have to. Life must go on. There has to be *something* to remind soldiers of what they're fighting for.

She mulls this over. If he fought in the second war, then presumably he fought in the third war, too. The *Ultimate Dojo* series appears to be about ten years old, so he probably survived that. Suddenly, Sakura is desperate to know what Noguchi-sensei is up to these days. *If he's even alive,* her brain helpfully adds.

He has to be, she decides at once. *I want to meet him.*

Sakura allows herself one more long look at the black-and-white photo. The Noguchi-sensei pictured has riotous, shoulder-length dark hair, pulled back into a half-ponytail. His eyes are also dark and almond-shaped, with eyelashes so thick they nearly look like eyeliner. There's no mustache in sight, only a sharp jaw speckled with stubble. His expression is calm and serious.

Honestly, he kind of resembles a long-haired Sasuke-kun. Sakura nearly swoons at the thought.

She buys all four and has her nose in *Kuzushi no ri* before she's even properly out the door. It's not until Sakura is peeling her sandals off in the genkan of her home, still engrossed in her book, that she remembers the clothing boutique.

Oh well, she thinks distractedly, turning another page. *I can always raid mama's closet in the meantime.*

Kuzushi no ri is a rather fascinating exploration of the origin of judo and its distinction from its predecessors, Tenjin Shinyo-ryū jujutsu and Kitō-ryū jujutsu, along with personal anecdotes from Noguchi-sensei about using it in combat, and the wider philosophical applications of judo and jujutsu concepts. The original owner has also left little doodles and annotations here and there, which range from commentating on the content or gripes like *'ugh dad is being a*

real jerk today'. It's far outside of Sakura's area of expertise, but she's utterly enthralled regardless. Noguchi-sensei is a very compelling author.

"Jū yoku gō o seisu. Softness controls hardness. This phrase can be found in ancient classics on strategy, and is a central component to the art of judo. There will always be enemies that are larger than you, or physically stronger. This is simply a fact. You will not overpower these foes, and resisting them will result in your defeat. Being able to adjust to and evade your opponent's attacks is the key to unbalancing them, therefore reducing their power, and leaving them open to defeat. Your enemy's strength becomes their downfall. This can apply whatever the relative values of power, thus making it possible for weaker opponents to beat significantly stronger ones."

Sakura likes the sound of that. Even if she does become as strong as Tsunade, being a one-trick pony is a death-sentence in the battlefield. Chakra-based strength or speed enhancement is all fine, dandy, and handy until someone slaps a pair of chakra-restraints on her. Having some effective strategy to back up her strength, should it falter, seems like a really good idea. The passage is also accompanied by a penciled sketch of a small stick-person karate-chopping the head of a much larger stick person, which makes Sakura giggle. The previous owner must be a funny guy.

Judo could also be used in conjunction with the enhanced strength, she realizes. Sakura briefly imagines herself hurling a faceless enemy shinobi away, using the same ferocity that she now applies to fetch with the ninken. The imaginary nin becomes a distant twinkle in the sky…

How she's actually going to learn judo in any serious capacity is the next question. Perhaps Kakashi-sensei has some experience? Or maybe he knows someone? Judo is not an oft-taught style of combat in the shinobi world, so finding a real teacher might be tough. Honestly, it would just be nice to have a sparring partner. *Kuzushi no ri* and the *Five Kata* guide have judo kata she can learn, but that only goes so far. In fact, one of the main distinctions between judo and

other jujutsu styles is a de-emphasis on kata and a stronger focus on *randori,* freestyle sparring. If she really wants to learn judo, Sakura will need someone to practice with.

If only Noguchi-sensei could teach me, Sakura thinks wistfully, flipping to the back of the book to look at his portrait again. He's *cute,* okay?! Sue her!

(Or was, anyway. But hey, Sakura could probably grow to like the mustache…)

Sakura closes the book and clutches it to her chest for a moment. Are her crushes always doomed to be unrequited? Liking the aloof, handsome clan genius is one thing, but pining after a man who doesn't *really* exist anymore because he's aged by forty-odd years, and that's if he's not dead.

Tragic heroines are always the strongest ones, she reassures herself with a sigh. And then, *maybe Noguchi-sensei has a grandson…?*

Sakura abruptly decides to table that unproductive line of thought in favor of finally raiding her mama's closet. She needs a new outfit, stat. Luckily, Haruno Mebuki is not a particularly large woman, so chances are most of the things in her closet will fit Sakura just fine.

With that in mind, a daughter goes to thieve *(borrow indefinitely)* from her mother.

Sakura struts into morning play-time with the ninken feeling like quite the badass, and receives an appropriately appreciative reception from her furry senseis.

"Oh, Sakura-chan, you look great!" Guruko chirps, Urushi and Shiba nodding enthusiastically in agreement.

Bull gives her an actual *howl,* which is quickly echoed by the rest of the ninken save for Ūhei, who simply murmurs, "Very lovely, Sakura-

san."

"Oh, *stop,* " Sakura demures with a flip of her hair, which is pulled into a half-ponytail like Noguchi-sensei's. It's practical, and helps keep some hair out of her face while still allowing most of her hard-earned locks to fly free, as they should. Plus, channeling Noguchi-sensei through her hair will definitely make her stronger. Because… well, just because.

She fends off a few more compliments with waved hands and coy smiles, but in reality, Sakura agrees. She does look good.

Her cheongsam (may it rest in peace) has been replaced with a haori from her mother's closet: a dark red garment with white hems and her family emblem emblazoned on the back and both sleeves. It's a summer haori, so the billowing sleeves only fall to her elbow, and is kept wrapped in place by a wide black utility belt (actually stolen from her dad's closet, this time), making it into a cute little yukata-esque dress that hits mid-thigh. Her trusty spandex shorts prevail, and with the addition of her new armguards and freshly painted mint-green nails, Sakura feels like a brand new shinobi and *exceptionally* cool.

And when her stick flies further than it ever has before, Sakura just smirks.

After play-time, Pakkun-sensei gives her the option of the rest of the day off, or (actually official) D-ranks from the missions desk.

Sakura hums. Kakashi-sensei's apartment is sparklingly clean (save for some dog hair, a futile battle) but his fridge and pantry are depressingly bare. He's been gone on a pretty long mission, so he'll need to recoup his energy. *The faster he recovers, the faster he can start training us seriously again,* she reasons.

"How about we restock his kitchen, and then I'll take the rest of the day off?" *To train the body flicker,* she does not add.

Pakkun-sensei looks faintly surprised, but makes a noise of agreement.

“Good idea, Sakura-chan!” Shiba trills, headbutting her thigh to emphasize his approval. “We *love* grocery shopping!”

And indeed, the ninken do love grocery shopping—because, as she finds out, they’re absolute *menaces* in the supermarket. Sakura has never been one to try and take advantage of those limited-time store discounts, because the only thing scarier than a bargain-hunting housewife is a bargain-hunting housewife who is also a shinobi. Sakura is pretty sure she’s witnessed actual assassination attempts in the produce section. So she gives them a wide berth.

But when a tinny voice says over the intercom, *“Eggplants are ninety-nine yen apiece for the next thirty minutes!”* Bull slams his head into her butt, propelling her entire body forward.

“Hurry!” he barks, and snatches the shopping basket from her hand. “That’s a great deal!”

All eight ninken set off in a thundering of paws, and Sakura can only follow.

Roughly one hour, *several* coupons, and the threat of a lifetime ban from the supermarket later, Sakura is trying to figure out how to scale the wall to Kakashi-sensei’s apartment window (which, yes, she admits is the *dog door.* She has been coming and going through the freaking dog door) while her arms are laden with grocery bags. Thankfully, Bull takes pity on her and relieves her of enough to free one arm. She supposes she could chakra-reinforce her abdominal muscles and just walk straight up, but right now she’s trying to conserve energy. Sakura has a feeling that the body flicker will be tiring.

Once the groceries have been put away, Sakura digs out that wad of cash from underneath the mattress (and it is a *big* wad, is sensei loaded or something?) and pays herself back with a little interest.

Hazard pay, she reasons. Those shinobi housewives had been downright terrifying.

Sakura is about halfway through her farewell-forehead-smooches on the ninken when a thought occurs to her.

“Even after sensei gets back, can we still train together?” she asks hopefully as she cradles Bull’s huge face. “You know, fetch and stuff?”

Pakkun-sensei just snorts from his spot on the duvet. “Of course. You’re not getting out of play-time that easily.”

A knot that Sakura hadn’t even known was there loosens in her chest. She’s excited to get back to training with her team (and does feel a little pang of guilt about the fact that she’s all but pretended they don’t exist for the last week) but morning training with the ninken has become a highlight of her daily routine. *Thank goodness!*

Sakura smiles and knocks her forehead gently into Bull’s before pressing a kiss there too. Having spent a week in the ninken’s company, she has gotten pretty well-acquainted with their nonverbal communication techniques. For example, a headbutt is both a gentle show of affection and an opportunity to survey the wellbeing of your packmate with a quick sniff. Without even really meaning to, Sakura began picking up the habit.

With one final smooch on Bisuke’s soft little head, Sakura takes her leave.

Finally, she thinks with a shiver of anticipation. *It’s time to learn the body flicker.*

Hoping to avoid any familiar faces, Sakura chooses a training ground she’s never been to before: eleven. It’s a little off the beaten path and pretty similar to training ground three geographically, but hosts many more training posts and target dummies. A good place to train

her strikes and weapons aim, she notes. Most importantly, it's totally deserted.

Sakura takes a few minutes to stretch and reread some of *Five Jutsu.* She's pretty confident in her conceptual understanding of the body flicker, but every little bit helps, especially when it comes to transferring that to a practical application.

"The body flicker is a whole-body technique. That is, nearly every part of the body must be enhanced with chakra in order to successfully and safely achieve a flicker. A shinobi with average chakra control and a basic understanding of the human anatomy can fairly easily accomplish this with what I like to call 'zenshin no kasseika,' whole-body vitalization. To try and individually activate every muscle group and organ needed for the body flicker is more complicated, and unnecessarily so — at least for a single body flicker. If the user intends to attempt multiple successive flickers (especially three or more, which is considered an S-rank technique) then certain physiological systems must be preferentially activated. It is also technically an option to simply continue with the whole-body vitalization, but that will quickly exhaust anyone without extremely fine chakra control or very large reserves. As this book is intended for intermediate shinobi, it will only cover a single body flicker. Students who wish to achieve multiple flickers will need to consult more advanced material."

B and S-rank training materials are, of course, access-restricted to chūnin or higher level shinobi. So Sakura will be on her own for learning a double or triple flicker.

That's getting a little ahead of herself, though. First she needs to learn how to do *one.*

Noguchi-sensei says that the easiest way to get started is to imagine your entire body being powered up like a light bulb. *Or a magical girl transformation,* Sakura thinks with a smile. That's a pretty solid mental image to model her chakra-molding after, actually. Fine-tuning the specifics of activation will come with practice.

“Above all else, move with intent,” instructs Noguchi-sensei.

With a steadying breath, Sakura summons her chakra, visualizing her body aglow with pink, sparkling energy like she’s about to transform into a kickass magical heroine, and sends it all the way from her scalp to the tips of her toes. It tingles to the point of almost itching. Then, she chooses a spot about three meters away, and *moves* .

–and nearly brains herself on a training post when she overshoots the intended target by nearly a meter.

“Whoa!” Sakura cries, stumbling over her own feet. How had she miscalculated so horribly? She’s positive she’d been looking at the– *right, duh,* she realizes. Her eyes. She forgot about the eyes.

Overall though, not the worst first attempt. Her heart is pounding and it feels kind of like her stomach got left behind, but she made it in one piece! And moved faster than she’s ever moved in her entire life!

Am I…a genius? she wonders with a little awe. Kind of, right? She’s a baby genin and nearly got a body flicker on the first try. It’s a D-rank jutsu, sure, but still! That’s gotta count for something!

Sakura waits until the pounding heart and squirmy stomach subside to try again—with her eyesight enhanced, of course.

She still overshoots, but by less than half a meter this time. The vision boost helps keep her balance, too, so she only wobbles a tiny bit on the landing.

Oof. Her heart and stomach still jolt wretchedly, though. Flickers are a strange sensation, to say the least, because it doesn’t feel as though Sakura is doing much work at all during the activation and movement itself, but then it’s like the effort catches up to her body and slams into it all at once. Not to mention the sheer mind-boggle of taking one stride and moving three meters. It’s fun though, too.

All that being said, it's hard to imagine that a single more step increases the difficulty to a B-rank. And then an S-rank for three steps! Surely a little nausea and heart palpitations don't make an S-rank jutsu, do they?

After a minute of rest, Sakura tries again, and almost hits her target dead-on. *Easy-peasy,* she thinks quite smugly. Although, actually using the move in live combat, combining it with other movements or techniques…well, that will come with time, she's sure.

She makes two more attempts, and lands in her intended spot perfectly on the last try. Her next effort (for five meters this time) goes rather swimmingly as well, and she's even starting to get a little used to the organ-upset. Sakura is certain there's a trick to easing that with chakra, too.

Honestly, the only frustrating aspect is having to wait a minute or more between movements. It takes too long! It'll take ages to perfect at this rate.

It couldn't hurt to try a double flicker…could it?

Sakura bites her lip as she considers. The single flicker came to her easily, so it would make sense that a double would as well. Her chakra is a little low, though.

The memory of Kakashi-sensei's disappointed expression looming over her after the tree-meditation incident rises unbidden in her mind. She *did* promise not to do any more dangerous training unsupervised…

But she also made a vow to herself to get stronger for her team. Plus, being a ninja is all about underneath the underneath, right?

After a brief hesitation, Sakura props open *Kuzushi no ri* on a training post using a few rocks. The portrait of Noguchi-sensei gazes down at her, a serene and watchful guardian.

“Supervision,” Sakura mutters guiltily, giving a thumbs-up to her silent (obviously) companion.

With a deep breath, Sakura vitalizes her body with chakra and flickers forward two meters. Then, before she thinks too hard about it, she flickers forward again.

Whoa! There’s a thrill with the second movement, like she’s falling, or flying. Her whole body feels so *alive!*

Impulsively, she flickers forward a third time, stumbling a little on the landing. *Holy crap that’s fun,* she thinks. S-rank difficulty? What on earth had Noguchi-sensei and her chakra anatomy book been on about? Was it some ploy to keep a fun jutsu secret from genin?

“Shannaro!” she crows with a fistpump, and then vomits all over her sandals.

Vertigo hits Sakura so hard she falls to her knees, spewing bile all of the way.

Shit. Oh, shit.

Her heart *pounds* in her chest like a drum, too slow and then too fast, skipping four beats and then speeding through ten. Sakura coughs, gasps, trying to suck in breaths between the heaves of her stomach. Shit shit *shit.* She only barely prevents her bowels from emptying themselves from the other direction too, but isn’t so lucky with her bladder.

The world gets fuzzier by the second and white noise drowns out anything but the sound of her stumbling, thunderous heartbeat. It’s too loud and deafeningly quiet all at once and Sakura only barely manages to claw herself away from the puddles of vomit before everything goes—

dark.

Ooop Sakura done got in over her head...

Some Noguchi-sensei doodles this time. The first is the picture in the back of *Kuzushi no ri* and the second is how he appears in his *Ultimate Dojo* guidebooks! I'm thrilled that several of you are interested in learning more about Noguchi-sensei...and you will! Trust me, you will :)

[img:
https://64.media.tumblr.com/d86731742068bfa2dc7b39b99910de2e/26f5f6a11b339804-8c/s1280x1920/d161827221bde1d843f1ec07b7d2cbb4deabdab1.jpg
]

[img:
https://64.media.tumblr.com/2fc0585438eccd94efe4fc4c51f4f81d/26f5f6a11b339804-8c/s1280x1920/7bd8f8c7aa85081ec794d7801d95a256157dca85.jpg
]

Next time: Sakura makes a new friend, and Kakashi-sensei is back!

Also, come find me on tumblr if ya want: vully-andthegoose

Feedback isn't failure

Chapter 5: Feedback isn't failure

HELLO, BONJOUR. I am back! I am alive!

I apologize for the delay—I had like 3 family emergencies over the last few months and I start a new job soon, so I'm trying desperately to wrap up all my current projects at work. This story went on the backburner for a little bit. But fear not, it is not abandoned! Updates might be a little slower than my original pace going forward (more like 1/mo instead of every other week) but I am determined to see this through.

Thank you so, so much to everyone who has left kudos and commented. Seriously, the sweet comments brighten my days so much. I love how much you all love Sakura!

Still unbeta'd, so if you see mistakes, pls point them out!

Now pls enjoy almost 8k of Sakura being Sakura. And yes, Kakashi is back :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When Sakura opens her eyes, she comes to the swift realization that heaven contains significantly more green lycra than she had anticipated.

And that god is two lively caterpillars…?

“Miss? Are you alright?”

Sakura blinks. Oh.

Heaven is not, in fact, green lycra and caterpillars. She's just staring up into the concerned face of someone sporting some seriously powerful brows. And a lot of green lycra.

"Miss?"

Unearthing her manners from somewhere beneath all of the *ow* and stale vomit taste, Sakura tries to introduce herself, but only coughs raggedly instead. Blessedly, the kind, powerfully-browed stranger offers her a bottle of water. Maybe he is god? *Am I delirious?*

She manages to prop herself up enough to suck the water down greedily, only coming up for air after emptying the bottle. "Thanks," she croaks, and hands the bottle back to him, sitting up further. He receives it nobly and scooches back to give her more space.

"I'm Sakura." She would hold out a hand to shake, but refrains given the potential for puke remnants. Sakura's ability to feel embarrassment has also apparently perished somewhere with her half-digested lunch.

He gives her a crisp salute and a bright smile—so bright, in fact, Sakura has to squint a little at its radiance. Does this guy gargle with bleach?

"I'm Rock Lee," he returns. "I am honored to make the acquaintance of someone so dedicated to their training!"

Sakura forgets to respond for a moment, distracted by his bowl-cut. It's so perfectly round. And his hair is so shiny! She wishes her hair was that shiny. Maybe she can ask what shampoo he uses. *Yeah, about that delirium…*

Remembering herself, Sakura offers him a wobbly smile. "Thanks. I think I might have overdone it a little." Understatement of the century. She feels like the ninken stampeded over her about a hundred times. Her head is feeling clearer by the second, at least.

Rock Lee nods solemnly. “Gai-sensei says pushing our limits is important, but it is also important to know the limit of limit-pushing.”

Sakura returns the nod. Honestly, that rings a bit like a Kakashi-sensei-ism. “Gai-sensei sounds wise,” she comments, which is apparently the right thing to say because Lee’s eyes light up with what looks like *actual fire.*

“He is indeed!” Lee cries, suddenly overcome with emotion. “He is very wise! And strong! The flames of youth burn brightly in him!”

The flames of what now? “Is he your genin team leader?” she asks instead. This entire interaction is so strange that Sakura isn't actually certain she’s not hallucinating all of it.

The fire in his eyes blazes even harder. “Yes! He is—”

Sakura tunes Lee out for a moment while trying to subtly take in his scent–another new habit, courtesy of the ninken. She’s found that you can glean a lot about a person from just a brief whiff. It’s useful, if a little invasive.

However, any informative smells from Lee are entirely overpowered by the stench of Sakura’s own body. *Oh sage, that is vile.*

“—and that’s why I hope to someday be as great as Gai-sensei. Who is your team leader, Sakura-san?”

Sakura blinks, still not really paying attention. She casts around for a moment and then— *aha.* The river! Though a long, hot shower is certainly in order, a quick dip in any sort of water sounds heavenly right now. Although it might be a little cold, Sakura realizes. The pale morning light and burgeoning birdsong in the trees tells her that it’s barely even dawn.

“What time is it?” she asks, hoping she isn’t late to play-time with the ninken, and then adds belatedly, “Oh, Hatake Kakashi is my team leader.”

“It is just after oh-five hundred,” he informs her. “The copy-nin Kakashi?”

Well that’s good, there won’t be a search party for her just yet. Although, what kind of psychopath is Lee to be out here at five in the freaking morning? Not to mention all of that green lycra. Then again, Sakura is the one who passed out in the middle of a deserted training field surrounded by pools of her own puke…

Sakura forces herself to her feet with a grunt and a wobble. “I guess?” Does Kakashi-sensei have a moniker like that? *Since when?*

The fire in his eyes is, bewilderingly, replaced by a watery sparkle. *Is he…crying?*

“How incredibly fortuitous!” he says, trailing after her as she sets off for the river nearby. “Nay, fateful even!”

Sakura has no idea what Lee is on about, but allows him to follow her. He did very politely wake her and offer her a water bottle, despite finding her unconscious in a rather disgusting state, after all. She will afford him a little understanding.

“Hold that thought,” she tells him, and before impending iciness can stall her, Sakura unbuckles her utility belt and thigh holster and jumps straight into the river.

Cold cold cold cold, her brain chants, but she forces herself to remain underwater for a full five seconds before surfacing. She scrubs a few times at her arms and legs, urging away the worst of the grime.

Then, just for the hell of it, Sakura tries to use chakra to solidify the water and climb onto the surface of the river. It takes a few seconds of fiddling, but soon enough she’s able to crawl up and out. The gentle flow of the river carries her downstream at first, but after a few

more adjustments she's able to remain in one spot while the water continues its path beneath her crouch.

Applause draws her attention away from the strange view under her feet. "Amazing, Sakura-san!" Lee praises, now sitting in a neat seiza by the river and still clapping excitedly.

Sakura flushes and starts to wring out her clothes. "Thank you," she responds a little embarrassedly. He's so *earnest,* just like Naruto, and the cold water had abruptly cleared her muzzy head. "Do you know how to water-walk?"

He waves a hand, smiling. "I can't."

Sakura starts on her hair next and finally hops onto the bank. That's honestly surprising, considering how he looks a little older than her. "It's not too bad once you get the hang of it," she says reassuringly. "I've got some guide books I could lend you." *Sakura-sensei, back at it again.*

Lee's smile doesn't dim, and he waves a hand again. "I can't," he repeats. "I cannot mold chakra at all. I am physically incapable of performing any ninjutsu."

What? Sakura gawks openly before composing herself, but Lee doesn't appear offended in the least. "How did you…" Sakura doesn't know how to say *even become a ninja* without sounding like a jerk.

"Pass the genin exam?" he fills in with that same, guileless smile. "I owe it all to Gai-sensei! He believed in me, and taught me how to believe in myself. Because of him, the flames of youth burn brightly in me as well!" Then, gazing emotionally into the distance, he proclaims, *"Gai-sensei…thank you!"*

Sakura just stares in utter confusion as Lee sheds more than a few tears for this Gai-sensei.

Then, just as abruptly as he'd been overcome by passion, Lee settles into a sunny grin. "Gai-sensei trains me as a taijutsu specialist," he adds.

Taijutsu specialist? Now that's interesting. Sakura has never really given it thought, but she supposes they must exist. To be completely unable to mold chakra, and yet he's a functional genin…Lee must be a formidable fighter, she muses. *Maybe he knows some judo!*

Before she can ask more about that, he starts speaking again.

"Sakura-san, you said your sensei is Hatake Kakashi-sensei, yes?"

She nods, and that weird, blubbery expression reappears on Lee's face.

He sniffs mightily, but the tears start to run anyway. "As you might know, Kakashi-sensei is Gai-sensei's *eternal rival,"* Lee then says with utter gravity and reverence, as if that's a sentence that should make literally *any* sense at all to Sakura.

She waits for him to elaborate.

"Gai-sensei told me that one day I too shall find someone who fans the flames of my youth," he continues, hands clenched into trembling fists. "For us to meet here, on this hallowed training ground…it must be fate!"

Sakura does…not know what to say to that. Kakashi-sensei is friends with the kind of person who has eternal rivals and talks about youth fires or some nonsense? He surprises her more every day.

Suddenly, Lee drops down onto one knee. Sakura flinches and takes an aborted step back. *Uhhh what is happening?*

With one hand over his heart and the other raised palm up, Lee adopts a look of total seriousness. "Sakura-san, would you do me

the honor of spending the springtime of youth with me, and becoming my—”

Oh no no no nononono. Sakura is *panicking* okay the only person she ever wants down on one knee is Sasuke-kun and—

“—eternal rival?”

Sakura blinks.

“Huh?”

“My eternal rival!” Lee repeats, as if that clarifies anything. “As eternal rivals, we would regularly engage in competitions to test our skills and mettle!”

Sakura is starting to really wonder about the hallucination thing. “Like…fighting?”

“Certainly!” Lee responds. “Though Gai-sensei and Kakashi-sensei also duel in other ways, such as races, eating competitions, janken, and more!”

Janken? Like the children’s hand game? “Er…I don’t know…”

Eternal rivalry sounds like a very strange thing, if Lee is to be believed. It’s seriously hard to imagine Kakashi-sensei playing janken with anyone, let alone another grown man. Then again, he does set up henohenomoheji confetti bomb traps in his apartment. Sensei *is* a bit of a weirdo.

More than that, though, Kakashi-sensei is an elite ninja. Sakura saw firsthand some of his skills during the bell test and is certain that was barely scratching the surface of his abilities. If sensei has had an eternal rival for so long, it must be useful. There must be more to it.

Underneath the underneath.

Sakura hums. “You said you’re a taijutsu specialist, right?” she asks instead of answering. When he nods, she continues, “Do you know any judo?”

Lee nods again, nonplussed but clearly hopeful. “I would not call myself an expert by any means but I have a good handle on the basics!”

Well, that’s already a lot more than Sakura. “Okay,” she allows, and wonders if she’s about to make a huge mistake. *Anything for you, Noguchi-sensei!*

“I’ll be your eternal rival if you help me learn judo.”

Lee is once again immediately near tears. “Sakura-san, I would be *honored,”* he says sincerely.

They shake on it, and Sakura is in the middle of collecting her things in order to go straight home and take the longest, hottest shower in the history of showers when her stomach growls so loudly they’re both startled by it.

Lee’s extremely round eyes light up with what looks like an idea. “We should go get breakfast! To celebrate becoming eternal rivals!”

Sakura is about to refuse when her stomach growls again, and thinks better of it. She’s filthy and exhausted, but that’s also kind of been her baseline state of existence for the last week. What’s another hour or two?

“Sure, but you’re buying,” she acquiesces. Free food makes everything better.

Lee grins rather mischievously, surprising Sakura. “Shall we have our first competition?” he asks. “A race to the eating establishment. The defeated party pays.”

Sakura's eyes narrow. Did she just get swindled? There's no way she can beat a taijutsu specialist only two weeks into her harder training regimen.

Sensing her skepticism, Lee continues, "And of course, we'll be running backwards."

That sounds even worse. "Backwards?"

Now that Sakura thinks about it, though, a backwards race might even the playing field a little. If Lee truly is truly incapable of molding chakra, then he can't use vision enhancement. Sakura's increased field of vision will give her a bit of an advantage, and even if she doesn't use a full flicker, her chakra-enhanced speed is nothing to sniff at.

An excerpt from *Kuzushi no ri* floats through her mind.

"It is difficult to overstate the clarifying power of losing. Losing a match, be it judo or something else, forces us to examine where we fell short and gives us the opportunity to improve. Indeed, while winning a single fight is exciting, is that your ultimate objective? You must keep in mind the long-term goal of mastering this art and maximizing your potential. Remember, feedback is not failure."

Ugh, she thinks sulkily. *Damn you and your wisdom, Noguchi-sensei!*

"Alright, you're on."

They agree on Ichiraku, the ramen establishment that's open twenty-four hours a day for some incomprehensible reason. Ramen for breakfast isn't really Sakura's style, but she's so hungry she could probably eat a horse right now. Noodles sound heavenly. Not to mention those ooey-gooey ramen eggs…

I will win for you, delicious ajitama, she vows. *Oh, and you too, Noguchi-sensei.*

The rules are simple: no foul play, winner takes all.

Lee tosses a pebble in the air. The moment it hits the ground, the two of them take off.

And Sakura comes to the immediate conclusion that she's probably going to lose.

Holy crap he is so fast! Lee is already several meters ahead, backwards-hopping his way through the training field with exacting precision. He's practically a blur. Sakura pumps as much chakra as she can into her legs and follows suit.

He has the advantage for now while we're in the open, she soothes herself. *Once we're in the crowded city proper, my eyes will give me the edge!*

She'll save a flicker for the very end.

Lee is already putting an alarming amount of distance between them and Sakura is beginning to realize the severe disparity in their cardiovascular fitness. A glance with her enhanced vision shows her that he barely looks like he's breaking a sweat, whereas Sakura feels like she's about to die. Also, running backwards is *hard!* Her muscles protest against the foreign movement, even if her vision allows her a pretty clear view of the world passing her by.

Finally, the city proper looms overhead. The hodgepodge layout of the buildings and veritable canopy of power lines will be her salvation.

Sure enough, Lee slows a bit as the race course becomes more complex. It's early enough that the streets aren't too crowded, but there's still a decent number of civilians and shinobi milling about. She catches a glimpse of him weaving around a small crowd of young children, hindered significantly. *Moving obstacles, even better!*

They enter a narrow alleyway, and Sakura uses it to her full advantage, leaping up onto the wall of one side and shoving off towards the other, building up a backwards, ricocheting zigzag that helps her magnify her speed and avoid the obstacles on the ground. It's only when she finally, *finally* surpasses Lee for a brief and beautiful second, soaring over his head, that she realizes he's been leaping on one leg this whole time.

Son of a—

Sakura hits the ground a little hard, and transitions into a back-handspring to absorb some of the shock. Whatever, she can address his self-imposed handicap later. For now, she has a race to win.

Ichiraku is right around the corner.

Sakura inhales deeply, preparing for the whole-body vitalization. The street behind her is clear, so she can go all out.

Zenshin no ka—!

"Oof."

Sakura comes to an abrupt halt, her back slamming into something warm and definitely human-shaped. Luckily, she hadn't fully engaged in the flicker, otherwise she probably would have flattened the poor bystander. But how…? *I was sure the street was empty!*

She whirls around, apology already forming on her lips, but stops short.

"Kakashi-sensei!"

Sakura goggles at the sight of her teacher. He isn't supposed to be back until tomorrow!

"Yo," he greets, gazing down at her with amusement. He's in jōnin fatigues sans vest and has his orange book in his hand, looking serene and a little bored.

Sakura impulsively throws her arms around him in a tight hug. *He's back! And safe!*

Unable to help herself, she takes a deep, investigative sniff from where her face is buried in his shirt. He smells clean, like he just took a shower, but there's the very faint tang of blood and an antiseptic. *Is he hurt?* Completely forgetting all decorum, Sakura burrows deeper and inhales again. It's mild, so probably not a serious injury. She can smell the ninken too, and his usual aroma of cedarwood and old books.

"Um."

Sakura pulls her face away abruptly, but her traitorous hands refuse to release the back of his shirt. *Abandonment issues much? He's only been our sensei for a few weeks!* Who knew that cleaning someone's apartment could create such an attachment.

Thankfully, Kakashi-sensei doesn't appear distressed by her sudden clinginess, only mildly bemused.

Wait a minute. If he's freshly showered, that means he's been home. Which means he knows about her week-long intrusion.

As if he can read her mind, Kakashi-sensei says, "By the way, thank you very much for your help with my apartment." His visible eye is an amused crescent. "I don't know what I would have done if my bookshelf had gone un-alphabetized a moment longer."

Ergh. Thoroughly embarrassed, Sakura finally manages to unpeel her grip from the back of his fatigues. "I'm sorry about that," she mutters and steps away. "I didn't—"

He cuts her off with a gentle bop to the forehead with his book. "Don't be," he responds. "The ninken tell me you survived a trip to the supermarket with them. I should promote you just for that."

Sakura giggles, and then freezes. *Ack—the race!*

She looks around frantically for Lee, although he's certainly made it to the ramen stand by now.

Except…he hasn't.

Sakura blinks. Lee is a few meters away and appears to be locked in a dramatic embrace with a taller, carbon-copy of himself.

"Gai-sensei!" Lee sobs, tears running down his cheeks in rivers. "I am overjoyed at your safe return!"

Big Lee/Gai-sensei is crying just as hard. "I am happy to be back, Lee! I hope your youthfulness has been burning brightly while I was away!"

"It has!" he declares. "Gai-sensei, I've found my eternal rival!" Then Lee's eyes snap open and his gaze finds Sakura's.

There's almost a crackle in the air as the two genin remember their unfinished business.

A beat passes.

Sakura summons her chakra as Lee hastily steps out of Gai-sensei's embrace.

She lunges, finally ready to release the explosive build-up of energy —

—and finds herself treading air, arms wheeling.

"Wha–sensei!" Sakura flails. Kakashi-sensei has scruffed her by the back of her haori, holding her aloft like an errant puppy.

Luckily, Lee seems to be in a similar predicament, stayed by Gai-sensei's hand on his shoulder.

"What's this all about?" Kakashi-sensei asks, finally setting Sakura back onto her feet.

“Sakura-san and I are eternal rivals!” Lee explains with a salute. “We are currently in the middle of our first contest, a race to Ichiraku!”

Kakashi-sensei just blinks when Sakura nods in confirmation. She straightens her haori, feeling a little sheepish. This is not how she imagined her reunion with sensei going…she was hoping to sweep into training and dazzle her team with her new outfit and skills.

Oof.

“Huh,” is all he says. “Sorry for interrupting.”

Sakura’s stomach growls before she can say anything, and she sighs. The adrenaline has faded and now all she feels is tired and hungry. But she’s not going to back down from her first match with her rival! Even if her vision is getting a little woozy and she’s pretty sure a single flicker will straight up knock her unconscious, which sadly makes it not an option since Kakashi-sensei is *right there.*

As such, Sakura loses.

It’s not even close, but Lee offers Sakura a handshake and an earnest, sunny grin after she plops herself tiredly onto the adjacent stool.

“Excellent first match, my most illustrious eternal rival!” he declares, shaking her hand violently enough to rattle her brain.

“You too,” Sakura returns, and then remembers the one-legged thing. “But hey! I saw your self-imposed handicap.”

To his credit, Lee immediately looks contrite.

Sakura shakes her head. “Don’t go easy on me,” she tells him firmly. “If I win, I want to win fair and square. And losing is how you learn.”

Lee looks (for the umpteenth time, *how is this dude a ninja?*) about to cry. “I am very sorry, Sakura-san!” he says sincerely, though due to the blubbering her name comes out more like *zagura-zan.*

Sakura nods in acceptance of his apology. “Don’t worry about it, you can buy my ramen to atone.” *Still getting that free breakfast, shannaro!*

Lee nods but still looks so crestfallen that it tugs at Sakura’s heartstrings. He really does remind her of Naruto.

Earnest idiots are apparently her soft spot.

“Hey, we *both* learned something today,” she says, tipping her head to the side. A little Noguchi-wisdom is sure to hit the spot with someone like him. “That’s what’s important. Feedback isn’t failure!”

Sakura is proud to say that when she looks deep inside, that sentiment is more than just words from her mouth. She hates losing, sure, but the idea of winning from an unfair advantage? *Repulsive.* Given her usual temper, Sakura can’t promise she’ll receive future losses with as much dignity as right now, (which is probably assisted somewhat by the imminence of free food) but she will never, *ever* cheat.

“Well said.”

Sakura blinks in surprise as Kakashi-sensei slides onto the stool next to her. In her peripheral, she can see Gai-sensei sitting down next to Lee.

“Sensei!”

“I see you’ve become quite wise during my short week away, Sakura-chan,” he observes cheerfully, slouching forward to rest one masked cheek on his hand. “The ninken must be better teachers than I thought.”

Then he flags down the woman behind the counter. “Ayame-san, my usual, and shoyu with extra ajitama for the lady, please.”

Sakura giggles, both in response to his comment about the ninken and with pleased surprise at his remembering her order. The only time Team 7 has dined together was the evening of the bell-test day, and that was weeks ago. Sakura makes a mental note to memorize his order when it comes out, too.

“I’ve been reading this book,” Sakura admits, and pulls out *Kuzushi no ri* from its spot in the wrap of her haori. One benefit of having a fabric merchant and seamstress for a mother (whose main clientele is shinobi) is that *everything* has hidden pockets. Sakura has taken to keeping it tucked in a pocket over the left breast, so Noguchi-sensei is always right next to her heart, and *yes she knows how ridiculous that sounds.*

There’s a choking sound behind her and Sakura turns to find Gai-sensei staring intensely at the small book in her hand. His eyes furiously scan the cover before he wilts with relief, letting out a deep sigh.

Sakura blinks in confusion, and turns back to Kakashi-sensei, who is also looking at the book but only with curiosity.

“Ah,” Lee says, pointing at the two of them. “Like twins!”

Twins? They both turn to face Lee, blinking owlishly in unison…with small orange books in their hands. *Oh sage,* Sakura realizes with a start. *The arm-guards, the book…I am a mini-Kakashi-sensei!*

That explains Gai-sensei’s brief horror, then. He probably thought *Kuzushi no ri* was actually a copy of Kakashi-sensei’s dirty novel. They’re about the same size, though her book is a nice, autumnal orange and not garish neon.

Even so, the misapprehension rankles. *As if! Noguchi-sensei’s book is way better than that nasty stuff!*

Sakura harrumphs. “Anyway,” she says pointedly. “It’s a book about Judo but it has lots of good advice on being a shinobi, too.” She

does not mention the handsome photograph at the end of the book.

“How very admirable!” Gai-sensei praises, giving her a thumbs-up. “You shall make a fine rival for Lee indeed!”

“How did you two meet, anyway?” Kakashi-sensei asks, tucking his own book away as Ayame-san sets a big steaming bowl of ramen in front of him. “Ah, thank you.”

Oh crap. Sakura purses her lips, averting her gaze to the bowl in front of Kakashi-sensei. *Miso broth with extra pork belly and scallions.* She’ll remember that.

Then, Ayame-san places Sakura’s food before her and all she knows is the smell of delicious, perfect ramen. Salty and meaty and heavenly. Sage, she is *so hungry.*

So, in order to both buy time and alleviate the ravenous pangs in her belly, Sakura slaps her palms together with a quick *itadakimasu!* and takes a huge bite. The noodles are piping hot, but Sakura doesn’t care. No, god is not green lycra nor caterpillars—god is ramen.

Sakura is too blissed out in noodle-induced nirvana to answer Kakashi-sensei’s question, so Lee takes it upon himself to do so.

Unfortunately.

“I discovered Sakura-san on training ground eleven, asleep like this,” he helpfully demonstrates by bending to press his face flat against the countertop. “I was worried at first, but there was no need! She was merely resting between bouts of intense training. Sakura-san is extremely dedicated! When she told me that you were her sensei, Kakashi-sensei, I knew it was fate.”

Sakura shrinks, avoiding Kakashi-sensei’s eye and choosing instead to shovel an entire egg in her mouth. If she’s going to get scolded, may as well endure it with a full stomach.

“It wasn’t quite like that,” Sakura denies after swallowing, but has nothing to follow that claim up with. She’s not actually about to lie to her sensei’s face, that would be taking it too far.

“Sakura-san, there’s no need to be ashamed!” Lee declares between bites of his own ramen. “I’ve trained to the point of puking many times. It’s a sign that the flames of youth burn brightly in you!”

Sakura can *feel* sensei’s gaze slide over from where he sits next to her. *Busted.*

“Maa, Sakura-chan has always had a very admirable work ethic,” he comments serenely, breaking his chopsticks apart.

Despite the impending lecture, Sakura can’t help but feel a little giddy—she’s about to see sensei’s face! Oh, how fun it will be to lord that knowledge over her teammates…*take that, boys!*

The genin turns back to her bowl, but slips a little chakra into her eyes to widen her field of vision. She can sneak a peek and sensei will be none the wiser! Maybe she really is a genius.

Kakashi-sensei claps his palms together with a murmured *itadakimasu*. “Sakura-chan, do you have a favorite passage in that book?” he asks, apropos of utterly nothing. “I’m acquainted with Noguchi-sensei, but I haven’t read any of his works.”

Sakura’s brain latches onto one part of that. *Kakashi-sensei knows Noguchi-sensei?! Maybe he can introduce us!*

That is definitely something that will require extensive questioning later, but for now, Sakura is happy to distract her teacher from her misbehavior. And of course she has a favorite passage, though it’s a little tough to choose.

“Yeah, one sec,” she says, setting her chopsticks down to flip through *Kuzushi no ri*. She’s fairly certain it’s on page seventy-seven, which now that she thinks about it, is kind of ironic.

“Here we go,” she mutters, having found it, and begins to read.

“When you’re in a pinch, rely on your friends! Even if your comrades aren’t physically there with you, the memory of them will fire up your spirit and give you the strength to fight on.”

Sakura smiles down at the page. “It’s one of his more whimsical sentiments, but that’s why I like it. I think you can be a really pragmatic shinobi and still have room for stuff like friendship and devotion.”

When Sakura finally glances up, she finds Kakashi-sensei gazing down at her with a surprisingly soft expression. One could even venture to call it affectionate.

“I wholeheartedly agree, Sakura-chan,” he says cheerfully. Then he turns and claps his hands together again. “Gochisōsama!”

Sakura blinks. His bowl is indeed empty. *Wait a minute. How did he already finish eating?!*

Before she can say anything, Kakashi-sensei gives her what she can only assume is supposed to be a wink. “When you focus chakra into your eyes, your pupils dilate significantly,” he informs her. “Like a cat about to pounce. It’s a dead giveaway.”

Sakura sputters indignantly. He tricked her!

“Sensei!”

To Sakura’s (and apparently Gai-sensei’s) surprise, Kakashi-sensei pays for everyone’s breakfast. According to Gai-sensei, he’s a legendary cheapskate—which is funny to Sakura, given the massive wad of cash he keeps under his mattress. There’s probably way more where that came from anyway, too. *So he’s just stingy, then.*

With the blessing of Kakashi-sensei (and thus the ninken) Sakura and Lee agree to meet on Wednesday mornings at six to train. Sakura laments the loss of quality time with the dogs, but Kakashi-sensei implies at least one or two will drop by to babysit on occasion anyway. Honestly, she can't wait to see their reactions to Lee's weirdness.

Speaking of that, Sakura is pulled into a spine-crunching hug by not just Lee, but also Gai-sensei, before they part ways. It's a little overwhelming, but kind of nice too. Breakfast with the two of them had shown Sakura what a deep and meaningful connection they have–the kind she would really like to have with Kakashi-sensei (minus the lycra). Gai-sensei, for all of his peculiarities, is clearly a kind man and devoted teacher. Plus, he'd been all too happy to spill embarrassing stories from their younger days, skillfully dodging any wadded up napkins that Kakashi-sensei tried to pelt him with in retaliation. This makes him quite agreeable in Sakura's book.

Kakashi-sensei, on the other hand, had begun looking rather ill as the alliance next to him became more solidified. He clearly isn't used to being ganged up on.

"Goodbye, my esteemed rival!" Lee shouts over his shoulder as he trots after Gai-sensei, waving a handkerchief that he'd pulled out of nowhere. "I look forward to our next meeting with great excitement!"

Sakura returns the wave, albeit more sedately. "Bye Lee," she bids. "See you on Wednesday!"

The two lycra-clad men vanish, and Sakura and Kakashi-sensei lapse into a semi-awkward silence.

The silver-haired jōnin snaps his book shut, startling Sakura.

"Let's head to the training ground, shall we?" he says, and then starts to walk without waiting for an answer.

Sakura hesitates. She desperately needs a shower, and preferably some fresh clothes too. The dip in the river had done away with the worst of the filth, but she's still uncomfortably grimy.

He doesn't slow, so she hurries to catch up. "Sensei, it's only half-past seven, the boys probably won't be there for a while," she says, voice definitely a bit on the wrong side of whiny. *Please don't make me face Sasuke-kun like this!*

Kakashi-sensei ambles on. "That's fine, we'll take the scenic route."

Sakura blinks. *Scenic route? Is this why he's always late?*

They walk silently for a few minutes, though the turns they take don't make any sense to Sakura. Is a strange, circuitous path what sensei means by the scenic route?

"Do you often break your promises, Sakura-chan?"

An icy chill seizes Sakura's chest in a vice-like grip. His tone is light, almost cheerful, but Sakura's breath is stolen from her lungs regardless. "Wh-what?"

He continues to amble forward, though Sakura is frozen to her spot. He glances over his shoulder at her but doesn't slow. "If I recall correctly, you agreed not to engage in dangerous training while unsupervised."

Sakura swallows dryly. She knew there would be a lecture, but this is *not* how she had envisioned it panning out. Serves her right for figuring she could predict the behavior of someone like Kakashi-sensei.

Even though she should probably just swallow her pride and apologize, Sakura gives into her stubbornness and decides to argue instead. Sage help her.

“Well, it wasn’t *technically* a promise…” she hedges, and begins to trot after him. An agreement is shy of a promise, everyone knows that. They didn’t even pinky-promise!

Sakura doesn’t need to see Kakashi-sensei’s face to sense the eye-roll that earns. “Fine,” he allows. “Do you often disobey orders from your superiors?”

Oof, okay, that one’s a bit hard to wiggle her way out of. But Sakura is committed at this point. “No!” she denies, finally catching up to him. He seems to be decidedly not looking at her. “I mean, I don’t think so. I was kind of supervised, in a metaphorical way?”

That earns his attention. “Do go on,” he murmurs.

Sakura explains the photograph in the book set-up and his eye twitches.

“I thought…underneath the underneath, right?” she tries hesitantly, giving him the best puppy-eyes she can manage. And really though, she had honestly believed that Kakashi-sensei *would* want her to push herself. Ever since Sakura had begun to show a higher level of commitment to her training, he’d actually paid attention to her. Even has been a little affectionate! Surely, a demonstration of devotion to her team is a good thing in his eyes, right?

Right?

His head tips to the side as if in thought. “You know, your file described you as clever and obedient, but otherwise completely unremarkable.” He stops. “So far, only one of those suits.”

Sakura nearly stumbles, she’s so caught off-guard by the jab. Her face and eyes burn with shame. “That’s kind of mean, Kakashi-sensei,” she admonishes, though there’s no fire behind it. He’s right, of course he is. Sakura is just a clanless brat with no real talent to speak of.

“Is it?” he asks, finally squaring up to her fully, though Sakura can’t bear to look anywhere but her sandaled feet. “You’re a soldier under my command. I need to be able to know I can trust your judgment both on and off the field.”

The reality of her misjudgment begins to truly set in, and Sakura can’t help the pained noise that escapes her throat. Anxious shivers began to wrack her body and she crosses her arms tightly over her chest. She’d really, *really* messed up, hadn’t she? All Sakura wanted to do was make him proud, and instead she’d gone and done the opposite.

This is everything she *didn’t* want. Kakashi-sensei’s disappointment is more crushing than she could have imagined.

Useless, no good, worthless wannabe shinobi!

“I understand,” Sakura says quietly, the dread in her belly nearly sickening her. He should kick her off the team. Maybe he will.

Maybe though, maybe if she can explain *why* then he’ll give her another chance. Sakura swallows the sob that rises in her throat, and instead opens her mouth to speak.

“It’s like you said, all I am is u-unremarkable,” she says haltingly, still fighting down the urge to cry. “I don’t have a clan or a special technique or *anything.* All I’ve got is books and some okay chakra control.” She takes a deep breath and forges on, the words quickening along with her already-pounding heart.

“If I d-don’t try, if I don’t push myself, I’ll be *nothing,”* she snarls, furious at herself and her limitations. “I’ll be a burden and a danger to my teammates and I’ll be left behind!”

Silence reigns, and Sakura wants to curl into a ball and disappear. He probably thinks she’s a crybaby in addition to being a useless liar. He’ll kick her off Team 7 for *sure.*

Suddenly, there's a warm weight on her shoulder. His hand. Sakura jerks, finally raising her eyes, and finds Kakashi-sensei staring at her a little sadly. It's unexpected, but certainly a welcomer sight than the disdain she was anticipating.

He sighs. "When I was your age, all I cared about was training and completing missions."

Sakura blinks. "Sensei?"

He pulls his hand back, but not before reaching up to ruffle her hair. "I only existed to get stronger and serve my village. People tried to be there for me, to help me realize that I was burning myself into the ground, but I was stubborn. I pushed them away and brushed aside their concerns."

Kakashi-sensei's eye curves into a falsely happy crescent. "And as a result, people who were precious to me died."

Sakura gasps, tears gathering in her eyes anew. *They died?*

His eye softens into something more genuine. "I think your heart is in the right place, Sakura, but you have to be careful not to lose sight of what you're actually fighting for. Do you remember the first lesson I taught you all as a team?"

Sakura nods, scrubbing at her eyes with a fist. "Those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash," she recites, feeling more than a little awed at her sensei sharing something so personal with her.

Kakashi-sensei dips his head in agreement. "Yes. And dying recklessly, or injuring yourself in the name of getting stronger, that's a form of abandonment, is it not?"

Suddenly, Kakashi-sensei's ire begins to make sense. Sakura nods again. "Yeah…yeah, I guess it is."

He begins to walk again and Sakura scrambles to keep up. “I’m not trying to prevent your progress or berate you unnecessarily,” Kakashi-sensei murmurs, and Sakura is feeling more and more astonished by the sheer number of words that have come out of her teacher’s mouth this morning. He’s *never* been so talkative before.

He continues, “I’m certainly not saying you should blindly follow orders, *Sage* no—but I am asking you to take care of yourself, and to try and trust me when I do make rules. Okay?”

Sakura nods so hard her head might fall from her shoulders. “Okay!” she agrees passionately. Then, feeling like she needs to make sure he believes her, Sakura holds out her hand with her pinky aloft. “I promise.”

Kakashi-sensei blinks at her, before relaxing with visible amusement. He hooks his pinky around hers, and the icy, anxious grip on Sakura’s heart begins to thaw.

He dips their linked hands once. “And I promise I’m not going to leave you behind,” Kakashi-sensei responds, surprising Sakura. “You’re one of my precious students.”

The last of the ice is chased away by a hopeful warmth. “Yeah, okay,” Sakura repeats a little dumbly, feeling entirely overwhelmed. “Thank you, sensei.”

Their pinkies un-link, and Kakashi-sensei uses his newly freed hand to pull out *Icha Icha.* “Good. And Sakura-chan, I never said you were unremarkable.”

And here Sakura thought she was flabbergasted *before.* Now she’s well and truly confused. “Huh? But you said…”

He bops her on the head with his book for the second time that day. “I said that of the attributes listed—clever, obedient, and unremarkable—only one fits. You’re proving to be less than obedient, and you’re far from unremarkable, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura gapes at him, the hope fluttering in her chest suddenly growing wings. “You think I’m clever?” she asks, a little doubtful.

But Kakashi-sensei just nods. “Quite,” he responds frankly, once again startling the genin. “Now, let’s settle down and wait for the boys, ne?”

Sakura blinks, and realizes that they’ve made it to Training Ground 3 without her even noticing.

Kakashi-sensei sits down at the base of a large tree, eyes still glued to his novel. Sakura chooses a spot a respectable distance away under the same tree, and pulls out her own book, feeling shy and a little ridiculous. She hopes he doesn’t think she’s trying to copy him. It all really is just a coincidence.

Copying the Copycat Ninja. The irony of it is somehow *more* embarrassing.

However, Sakura barely gets through a few lines before her eyes start to droop. It’s a warm, spring morning and she feels safe here with sensei, and she’s *so tired.* A little nap wouldn’t hurt, right? It’s not even eight, chances are the boys won’t arrive for a couple more hours. Maybe even longer than that. Sakura doesn’t know because she hasn’t seen her team for a whole week, having been so focused on her own training.

Sorry Sasuke-kun, Naruto… she thinks muzzily, her head growing heavier by the second. *I’ll be a better teammate…from now…on…*

The lure of sleep is too strong, and Sakura succumbs to blissful nothingness.

Unbeknownst to her, Kakashi-sensei smiles fondly, and plucks the little orange book from her slack fingers.

(If only she had been awake, to see the way his eye widened as he flipped through it, she might have asked why. But she didn’t,

because she was asleep. Oh well.)

Aforementioned blissful nothingness lasts a little over two hours, though if you asked Sakura, it only lasted two seconds, and is rather rudely terminated.

“—ura-chan! Sakura-chan, wake up!”

Sakura snorts as she jerks awake, fumbling for a kunai and nearly poking her own eye out. “Wazzit?” she slurs and shakes her head like a wet dog to clear the grogginess.

Her entire field of vision is nothing but orange, which is very confusing until another *“Sakura-chan!”* rattles her eardrums and she realizes who, exactly, is responsible for her less-than-polite wake-up call.

“Naruto, you dolt!” Sakura is winding up to sock him in the nose before she notices Sasuke-kun standing a few paces behind him.

Smoothly (not) she transitions the swing into a hand running through her hair, which she ends up regretting anyway because it’s kind of a tangled mess. Ugh!

“G-good morning, Sasuke-kun!” she greets, feeling so lame it’s actually a little physically painful.

He just grunts, and Sakura sighs. Why does she even try?

“Sakura-chan, whoa! You look different!” Naruto says appreciatively, scratching his head. Conversely, he and Sasuke-kun appear the same as they always have, though perhaps with a few more scratches and bruises.

Sakura shrugs while she re-ties her half-ponytail. “Figured I would update my look, since we’re newly promoted and all,” she says, which is kind of true. The tragic demise of her cheongsam is not something she’s ready to talk about just yet. It’s too soon.

Sasuke-kun makes an unimpressed noise. “Really? You spent the week shopping for clothes?” he asks with a mean quirk to his mouth, and turns and stalks over to Kakashi-sensei before she can answer.

Sakura bristles. *You have no idea what I’ve been up to!* she wants to snap, but manages to refrain. Defensiveness isn’t a good look on anybody, and she’s already met her uncool quota for the day and then some.

Beside her, Naruto hums. “Where *did* you go this week, Sakura-chan?” he asks, head tilting to the side curiously. “Me n’ the bastard did a bunch of spars! You gotta see my new moves!”

Sakura is about to *loudly* recount her week of training, but then pauses. Her original plan was to surprise her teammates with her new skills, wasn’t it? She can still do that, and knock that smirk right off of Sasuke-kun’s cute face.

Metaphorically, of course.

Undersell, over-deliver. Not a Noguchi-ism, but she thinks he would approve of the use of subtlety.

So instead of explaining her new speed and perception skills, she offers Naruto a mild smile. “I got a makeover, obviously.”

He just nods, and appears to take no issue with this. “You look super cool!” he says firmly.

Ah, there’s that earnestness again. Darn him. Sakura offers him a more genuine smile this time. “Thanks, Naruto.”

“How about a little team sparring?”

Sakura doesn’t startle, but barely. Kakashi-sensei has apparently materialized beside her.

Team sparring? This could be her chance to show off! She could probably land a few good hits on Naruto at the least. That would

surely impress Sasuke-kun, wouldn't it?

"We'll start with Sasuke versus Sakura," Kakashi-sensei says, immediately trashing Sakura's plan and sending her stomach to her feet. "Winner fights Naruto."

"Yeah, yeah!" Naruto crows, punching the air. "I'm gonna kick your ass Sasuke-bastard!"

And wow, okay, *rude.* Sakura whips around to level Naruto with a glare and he immediately shrinks.

"N-not that I think you're gonna lose, Sakura-chan! I just—"

Sakura cuts off his blathering with a wave of her hand. Honestly, it's a pretty fair assumption, but the instantaneous dismissal still stings. "Don't worry about it," she says, jabbing a finger in his direction. "Cuz you're next!"

Sasuke-kun is already making his way into the larger clearing. "Let's get this over with," he tosses over his shoulder, and Sakura's hands ball into fists. *What crawled up his ass this morning?* Or has he always been this dismissive and rude? She honestly isn't sure.

Silently, Sakura follows, eventually stopping in a spot a few meters away from him. She sinks into a defensive stance.

He does not, and instead stuffs his hands in his pockets.

Sakura's eye twitches.

"You both ready?" Kakashi-sensei calls from the sidelines.

"Ready!" she chirps with a somewhat forced brightness. This is gonna be rough, and it's all Kakashi-sensei's fault! Maybe she'll encourage Bull to eat his favorite sandals. Luckily, that nap earlier replenished some of her chakra, but using a real flicker is probably still not an option.

Sasuke-kun looks bored. “Whatever,” he responds instead, further chipping away at Sakura’s patience.

She knows she’s probably going to lose. He knows she’s probably going to lose. He knows that she knows that she’s probably going to lose. But he doesn’t have to be a jerk about it!

“Begin!”

She takes a step forward, fists raised. Sasuke looks down and picks a piece of lint off of his shirt.

And something in Sakura snaps.

The chakra flows into her leg muscles, easy as breathing, and into her arm muscles, easy as blinking. It’s not quite a flicker, but she crosses the distance between them before Sasuke manages to flick the lint off of his fingers.

The look of open shock on his face is a memory she will cherish for a long time.

Pow!

Her fist connects with his chin in a powerful uppercut, sending his head snapping backwards. It’s not quite full strength—Sakura isn’t trying to actually *murder* her crush—but it’s forceful enough to knock him off his feet and onto his rump.

Sakura stomps after him, waiting for him to sit up. Sasuke, now semi-vertical, just stares up at her in disbelief, bottom lip already beginning to discolor and swell.

“Quit underestimating me!” she snarls, pointing an accusatory finger at his face. Who cares if it’s rude! He was rude first!

Then, to *her* surprise, a small smirk curls his mouth. Not a mean one this time, but rather a grudgingly impressed one.

“Hn,” is all he says, and then gets to his feet.

Evidently, Sakura’s attempts to impress her crush up to this point—growing her hair out, and so forth—have been a misdirection of her efforts.

She should’ve just punched him instead.

I hope the way I wrote Lee and Kakashi felt true to character. I am trying my best to avoid making them OOC while still giving them a bit more initial substance, eg, making Lee less pushy and Kakashi more willing to open up earlier on.

Originally, I had the S vs S fight included in this chapter, but then it was pushing 10k and I just can't do that lol.

Next time: Sasuke vs Sakura! And, the start of the wave mission. Finally, actual plot!

Edit: I can't believe I forgot to include this drawing I did of the ramen scene! Enjoy:

[img: https://64.media.tumblr.com/9a04713061cccf85473d169e187d0092/9bc9253a9ac82219-7b/s1280x1920/d36c4826ef6e34a03a6ec9b0222928fbc2749af6.jpg]

Trial by fire

Chapter 6: Trial by fire

I won't bother apologizing for the delay, I'm sure y'all are sick of hearing it already lol. I started my new job and while I love it, the growing pains of being the newbie are a bit rough.

I promise I am devoted to finishing this, even if there are a couple months between updates. To those of you who leave comments, kudos, and have been willing to stick with it despite the sporadic-ness--thank you!

Now: more Sakura and Kakashi bonding, and the start of the wave mission!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

To briefly recap: moments ago, after punching him in the face, Sakura had quite passionately declared to her teammate and crush *“Quit underestimating me!”*

Now, Sakura is thinking of recanting her earlier command, because oh *shit shit shit* apparently one of the tricks that Sasuke-kun picked up over the last week is a rapid-fire version of his fireball jutsu, and she is now dodging for her goddamn life.

Sakura flings herself backward into a handspring to avoid the newest round of fist-sized fireballs that Sasuke-kun is spitting out. *Crap.* She’s not much of a mid-range fighter but she’s scared to let him get too close, too. His taijutsu outmatches hers.

But this game of *dodge-the-flaming-spitball* won’t work forever, and she’s starting to get tired. One of the fireballs grazes her haori,

setting it alight, and she frantically beats it with a flat palm until it goes out.

Suddenly, there's a fist coming towards her face, and only the reflexes ingrained into her from having to dodge that stupid boxing-glove boobytrap save her nose from getting bashed in. Evidently, Sasuke-kun made the decision to shorten the range of the fight for her, and used her momentary distraction to get right up in her space and start raining down blows. Sakura curses and does her best to dodge and block.

Shifting back a pace, Sasuke-kun winds up to deliver a brutal kick that Sakura *knows* she can't avoid. The blow is aimed at her ribs and Sakura tucks one bent arm in close against her side to absorb the worst of the force, reinforcing her limb with chakra.

Then, inspiration strikes in tandem with his kick (which, ow, really freaking hurts). Sakura swiftly morphs the chakra in her arm from absorbent to sticky, sealing his leg to her body. Ha! *This skill has combat applications after all!*

She can see the moment when Sasuke-kun realizes what she's done, but there's no time to savor his look of surprise. Instead, she seizes the moment to sweep his remaining leg out from under him, sending him to the ground.

Sakura releases his leg and brings up her own to knee him hard in the chest as he falls, giving her enough reprieve to leap backwards. She needs a plan, and fast.

But Sasuke-kun's hands are already armed with kunai and shuriken as he dashes up a nearby tree for the higher ground. The blow barely winded him. *Crap.* She really should have given that knee a chakra-boost, but it felt kinda mean. She won't make that mistake again.

The rain of steel starts not a moment later, and Sakura sends a silent thank you to her past-self for nabbing the metal-plated armguards.

They’re saving her butt (well, more accurately her face) right now. Also, it’s just way easier to block with your whole arm instead of having to parry with your own weapon. Who knew!

There’s a heartbeat of reprieve from the projectile downpour, but it’s only because Sasuke-kun’s hands are flying through the familiar katon seals once more. *Crap, again.* He leaps off of the tree, ostensibly to rain literal fire down upon her. Because of course he is.

And Sakura…Sakura decides to throw caution to the goddamn wind, because screw it! She didn’t get this far by being timid!

With that in mind, Sakura launches herself up at Sasuke, leaving a small crater in her chakra-boosted wake. There’s no way for him to dodge, and Sakura is able to get close and snatch the (frankly, massive) collar of his blue shirt and the fabric of his own armguard on the same side. Sakura is already twisting her body as she makes full contact, lifting with the fist in his collar while simultaneously yanking downwards with the one on his arm. There’s no need for a leg-sweep since they’re both completely airborne.

“Shannaro!”

She whips Sasuke’s body over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes and sends him hurtling to earth. The sheer torque of the chakra-boosted (and rather bastardized, technically-speaking) yama-arashi throw actually sends Sakura in the opposite direction, higher in the air.

It feels like flying.

The next few events happen in extremely rapid succession. Sasuke-kun hits the ground hard, making an ugly noise, and Sakura whips out a kunai as gravity finally wins out and she begins to fall after him.

Apparently, however, Sasuke-kun had actually completed the hand seals and molded the chakra required for a katon jutsu before she’d

thrown him, because suddenly an absolutely *enormous* fireball erupts from his mouth, heading straight towards her.

Shit.

Sakura isn't sure if her throw had literally knocked that wind out of him or if he'd somehow already recovered enough to do it himself, but it really doesn't matter, because Sakura has about three seconds before she's crisped up like a piece of bacon.

Worse, Sakura realizes she might end up *bald.*

But—if chakra can reinforce her body to withstand impact, then it can probably make her heat-resistant too! With approximately one-point-two seconds to spare, Sakura summons chakra to cover her upper-body like a protective layer, making sure it goes all the way to the ends of her hair.

Sakura brings her arms up to block her face and squeezes her eyes shut. It's so bright, even with them closed. She'd say a prayer, but doesn't want to eat the flames.

And then Sakura is punted out of the path of the fireball by a sandaled foot.

The pink-haired genin lets out a yelp as she crashes to the ground, landing in an ungraceful heap. She already knows who the foot belonged to, even before he speaks.

"Sasuke wins."

Sakura groans from her spot on the ground. Kakashi-sensei is looming over her, hands deep in his pockets.

"No fair," she whines, managing to pull herself into a sitting position. From here she can see that Sasuke-kun is already back on his feet, though he looks a little bit unsteady. It really isn't fair! If Kakashi-

sensei hadn't knocked her out of the way, she totally could have landed the finishing blow.

"I had it in the bag," Sakura protests, which earns her a raised eyebrow from Kakashi-sensei. She ignores the doubtful look in favor of attempting to struggle to her feet. Exhaustion and soreness are making it a little hard.

"In what way is jumping into the path of an oncoming giant fireball *having it in the bag?"* he inquires, scruffing Sakura by the back of her haori for the second time that day and pulling her up onto her feet. She has a feeling this is going to become a thing.

"I had already jumped when he spat that at me," she points out. Sakura crosses her arms, scowling mulishly, before adding, "And I used my chakra to heatproof my skin and hair. I would've been fine." *Hopefully,* she does not say.

Kakashi-sensei looks genuinely surprised now, in his extremely mild way. "Oh? And you've practiced this?"

Sakura avoids his eye. "Well, no, but learn by doing, right?"

He just sighs, looking terribly put-upon. "C'mon," he beckons, turning to head back to his tree. "Let's give the boys some room."

Sakura scowls, but follows.

He resumes his lounging while Sakura sulks nearby. She really could have won that! She's sour enough about the whole thing that she can't even feel proud of successfully using a judo move in combat, even if it was a little bastardized and probably terrible form. Not bad, for someone who has literally never practiced before!

Plus, how cool would it have been for her to achieve chakra-heatproofing on the fly? In the *heat* of battle, no less? Sakura snickers a little at her own pun, earning a glance from Kakashi-sensei.

She sticks her tongue out at him, and then scooches around to the opposite side of the tree, pulling her knees up to her chest. Frankly, she's not super interested in watching Sasuke and Naruto beat the snot out of each other for the millionth time. More importantly, she wants to be outside Kakashi-sensei's line of sight.

When her teacher doesn't follow or call her back, Sakura quietly pulls a matchbox from her hip-holster. It's one of the few survival tools she keeps on her at all times, along with tampons and a small compass.

Then, she summons chakra to coat her left index finger and waits.

After several moments, it happens—a noisy clamor from the boys (an explosion and the screams of several Narutos), loud enough that Sakura is able to quickly light the match and the sound is completely lost in the racket.

Sakura grins. She's getting sneakier!

Sakura holds her chakra-coated finger aloft and brings the match up underneath it, starting at a distance of ten centimeters and slowly closing it. She can't feel much heat at all, which seems like a good sign. It feels similar to when she'd done it earlier.

Sakura sticks her tongue out in concentration as she begins to approach the *could actually cause a burn* zone. Just a little further—

"Hey."

Sakura deflates with a sigh, and looks up. Of course, *of freaking course,* Kakashi-sensei is magically crouching in front of her, his expression dour. He really needs to stop creeping up on her, and she *really* needs to work on her situational awareness.

Sakura pulls the match away from her hand but doesn't put it out quite yet, feeling stubborn.

“Sensei, if I can’t train like this when you’re literally right there, is there *any* time I can?” she asks as he holds a palm out, presumably for the match.

Sakura hands it over and he proceeds to crush it in his fist, still lit. She raises an unimpressed brow at the display, though internally she is, in fact, a little bit impressed.

Wordlessly Kakashi-sensei stands, returning to his spot on the other side of the tree, and beckons her with a finger. The genin reluctantly follows.

Sakura scowls when he pats the spot next to him. Oh, come *on.* She doesn’t need to be babysat.

With a pout, she flops down, even though the logical side of her knows that she was behaving a little dishonestly. Kakashi-sensei remains silent, apparently content to let her stew.

After a few minutes, her stubbornness gives, and she sighs. “Sorry,” she mutters, feeling contrite. “I shouldn’t have tried to be sneaky about it.”

“Why did you?”

Sakura blinks at the unexpected question. “Um, habit, maybe?” she tries, fiddling with the strap on one of her sandals. That doesn’t feel like all of it, though, if she’s being honest.

Her teacher waits patiently for her to continue.

She sighs, feeling embarrassment heat her face. “I think…I don’t like being bad at stuff in front of people,” she admits slowly. “I just wanna get good at it on my own and then show people when I’ve figured it out.”

Kakashi-sensei turns a page in his book. “Why do you think that is?”

Sakura abandons her sandal strap to rip out strands of grass instead. “Mmm,” she hums, considering. For all of how much Sakura wears her heart on her sleeve, talking about this stuff is really *hard.*

“I think,” she starts, and then pauses again. She rips out another clump of grass and lets it fall before continuing, “I think it’s because…there’s a few things.”

Kakashi-sensei closes his book now, which makes her squirm. She almost prefers it when he’s putting on the air of only half-paying attention.

“I hate it when I give people ammunition, I guess, to doubt me. When I was younger, I got….bullied, sometimes. For my looks,” her face flames. Admitting this is so humiliating, but there’s no going back now. “But also because I’m civilian-born. Whenever I was bad at stuff in class, they’d say it’s because of that.”

Ami’s cruel smirk surfaces in her mind. That girl tormented her for *years.* Sakura is so lucky that Ino came along.

“They’d say I’m a ‘meatshield.’ That if it was wartime, I’d be sent out to die first,” she mutters.

Kakashi-sensei remains silent, because nothing she’s saying is technically untrue. It sucks. But she appreciates that he’s not trying to lie to her.

A warm weight settles between her shoulders–his hand. It feels grounding and encouraging, so she keeps going.

“My parents are good people,” Sakura says, abruptly switching tracks. “They’ve always told me how smart I am. That I’m gifted. *Mature for my age,”* she recites, bitterness creeping into her tone.

“I think I took that to mean that acting like a kid was…bad. So I should be like an adult. And adults are good at things, they make less mistakes. So *I* can’t make mistakes.”

Sakura sighs again. “It’s why I always tried so hard to make my teachers like me. To make them think I was *useful.”*

Useful. Somehow, that word is like an anvil in Sakura’s chest. So, so heavy. It cracks everything beneath it.

The next words out of Sakura’s mouth are surprising even to her, in how true they are. “I thought,” she swallows thickly. “I thought that even if people didn’t *like* me, if they thought I was useful, they wouldn’t…throw me away.”

The hand on her back slides up to her shoulder, and Sakura feels herself being tugged into Kakashi’s side. It feels nice. Safe and warm. She leans against him hard, reaching a hand up to scrub at her teary eyes.

“I think it’s why I didn’t wanna try hard, too. Before. At stuff I’m bad at, like taijutsu,” she admits, hoping her words are making sense. “If I just stick to stuff I’m good at, like studying, then I won’t fail and people won’t think I’m useless.”

Sakura laughs mirthlessly at her own words. “It’s funny how hard *that* backfired,” she murmurs, thinking of how far behind her teammates she is.

Kakashi-sensei is silent for another moment, perhaps waiting to see if she has anything else to say. Then he begins to speak.

“I know what it’s like to feel that the weight of the world is on your shoulders,” he says quietly. “I’ve had a lot of responsibilities since I was very young. The lesson it took me longest to learn is that I didn’t have to do it all alone.”

Sakura blinks up at him, remembering their earlier conversation. The deaths of his precious people.

“I won’t mislead you about the realities of shinobi life, especially the shitty ones,” her teacher says, muttering the word *shitty* in a funny

way that makes Sakura giggle through her tears. “For what it is worth, I think those archaic rules about clan lives taking precedence are complete fucking bullshit, if you’ll excuse my blasphemy, and I will not follow them.”

Sakura is a little taken aback by the uncharacteristic cursing, but she listens intently, fisting her hand in the back of his shirt. She hopes it communicates her support.

“*You* are my precious student. My teammate. Not your bloodline or your title. I will do everything I can to keep you and those boys safe,” he vows, and Sakura has to hold back her tears all over again. “And as your team leader, a big part of that is helping you learn how to protect yourself. But in order to do that, you have to let me teach you.”

Sakura feels her head bobbing up and down a little frantically. Trying to hide her training from him feels so, *so* stupid now.

“I will,” she promises, releasing that back of his shirt to grab the hand that’s not on her shoulder. Her small hands look a little ridiculous, trying to clasp his huge mitt between them, but that doesn’t deter her. “I’ll be good from now on! And honest. I won’t hide things or be sneaky.”

His gaze is amused and gentle. “As long as you try, that’s all I ask. I don’t expect you to be perfect. You *are* a kid, and that’s okay.”

Sakura’s lip wobbles. She had no idea Kakashi-sensei could be so understanding and kind and wise. “Kakashi-sensei, you’re so *nice,”* she accuses. It seems like such a stark contrast to the man that scared them witless with the bell test…then again, the entire basis of that test was to teach them the importance of teamwork. Perhaps it’s not so different after all.

“You and I will work on the chakra-heatproofing some other time, alright? Together. I have no doubt you can figure it out,” he murmurs,

unwrapping his arm from her shoulder in favor of ruffling her hair. Honestly, she's not sure it could *get* any messier, even if he tried.

"Promise?" Sakura asks, feeling terribly young.

This time, Kakashi-sensei is the one to offer his pinky first. "Promise."

Sakura has just pulled her hand back and is wiping the last of her tears away when the moment is *thoroughly* broken.

"Kakashi-sensei! Did you make Sakura-chan cry?!"

It's Naruto, of course, bounding toward them with his fists in the air, clearly ready to defend Sakura's honor.

She's quick to correct him. "No, Naruto, I was just upset about losing the match. Kakashi-sensei was actually comforting me."

It's not exactly the truth, but it's not entirely a lie either. Sakura just isn't feeling up to rehashing all of those revelations quite yet.

Naruto's arms fall and he slows to a stop before them, having lost his steam. "Oh, okay. Well, good!" Naruto nods, crossing his arms. Suddenly, he appears to remember something.

"Speaking of that–hey bastard! Didn't you have something to say?" Naruto calls over his shoulder leadingly, before jerking his head at Sakura several times and waggling his eyebrows.

Sakura snorts. Subtlety, thy name is not Naruto.

Then, astonishing Sakura, Sasuke-kun steps forward with contrition on his face. His bottom lip is very swollen.

"I'm…sorry that I was…rude. At the beginning of the fight," Sasuke-kun mutters haltingly. Sakura gapes openly. *Is this a dream?* Did she actually get hit on the head during their fight, and this has all been one long hallucination?

To her ever-growing surprise, he continues. “You fought well,” he offers grudgingly. “It’s obvious you’ve been training. And what you did with my kick and the chakra-sticking thing, that was smart.”

Sakura continues to stare, jaw hanging open, while Naruto nods approvingly.

Sasuke glances over at the blond, who seems to encourage him. “Dead-last and I agree that it would be good if we—the three of us—sparred more.”

Finally snapping out of her awed stupor, Sakura begins nodding eagerly. “Sasuke-kun, I would love that!” she says earnestly. He noticed her! And acknowledged her as a teammate! And wants to spar! It feels like a dream come true.

He returns the nod, appearing satisfied and marginally less like he wants to run away screaming. “Good.”

“On that touching note, I think it’s time to head to the missions desk,” Kakashi-sensei interjects, clambering to his feet. His knees crack audibly and he winces.

Sakura accepts the hand held out to her, feeling grateful it’s not another scruffing. *But…the missions desk? No, I need to go home first!*

“Sensei,” Sakura pleads, “I *need* to bathe.”

Her teacher blinks at her. There must have been something about the desperation in her voice, because he nods in acquiescence. Or maybe it’s the smell.

“Sure thing,” he agrees amicably. “Meet us at the bridge in an hour, we can fill you in on the assignment there.”

Sakura could weep with joy. She’s going to get a *shower.*

“Thanks, sensei,” she says, lightly headbutting his shoulder in gratitude.

She pauses when she feels three sets of eyes on her. Oh, yeah. That’s not really a normal thing, is it?

“Er, sorry,” she mutters, stepping back. “It’s a…ninken thing?”

Kakashi-sensei is gazing down at her with the expression of someone who just learned something very interesting.

Naruto and Sasuke-kun just look baffled.

Sakura continues to back up and offers them all a wave. “Well, gotta go! See you in an hour!”

She turns and runs. This is going to be the best shower of her *life.*

It is, in fact, the best shower of her life.

When Sakura reaches the bridge, the only thing waiting for her is a small scrap of paper, pinned to the railing with a shuriken.

She recognizes Naruto’s chicken-scratch immediately.

Dear Sakura-chan,

We got a C-rank mission!!!!!!!

Meet by the big ugly gate the eastern village gate kakashi-sensei says ay-sap whatever that means

The script suddenly changes to something significantly more legible. Sakura immediately recognizes it as Sasuke-kun’s, having peeked at enough of his assignments during the academy. (Not to cheat, but to admire how smart he is! Even though he rarely actually scored as high as she did…)

Bring gear + supplies for 2 weeks. Land of Waves.

Then the handwriting changes again, to something loopy and lazy.

Nothing to add :) See you soon!

There's a little henohenomoheji scrawled at the bottom, joined by a scribble of what appears to be Naruto wearing the hokage hat.

Sakura carefully, oh-so-carefully, folds the piece of paper and tucks it between the pages of *Kuzushi no ri* .

Sakura can imagine exactly how it happened. Naruto pulled out a scrap of paper from his raggedy little notebook and started to write. Sasuke-kun probably lost his patience with Naruto's doodling and yanked it from his hands, muttering *"give me that, dead last,"* and wrote the only legitimately informative part of the letter (naturally). Then Kakashi-sensei took it, likely as Naruto and Sasuke started to bicker, and added his little note and signature.

It's her first letter from Sasuke-kun, which makes it precious. But even more than that, it's such a perfect representation of her stupid, wonderful, maddening team. Sakura smiles to herself, tucking the book back in her breast pocket. She will treasure it forever.

It's not until Sakura is back home, staring at her backpack, that she realizes she has absolutely *no* clue how to prepare for a two-week-long C-rank mission.

Sure, mission preparation was something they were taught in the Academy, but that was totally theoretical. Based on Sakura's recent experiences, the practical applications of such skills end up being wildly different.

With that in mind, Sakura proceeds to probably over-pack the *hell* out of her bag. She packs three books, which is probably three too many. She adds enough underwear that she could shit herself twice

a day and still have extras. Tampons galore, even though she had just finished her period. Four extra shirts and a light jacket.

It's not until she's trying to shove an entire extra pair of sandals into the bag that the genin realizes she's probably overdoing it.

With a sigh, Sakura overturns the bag to dump everything out, and starts again.

Ten minutes of packing, unpacking, and repacking later, Sakura feels more or less like she's ready for a few weeks in Wave country.

She also adds two more small pouches to her utility belt: a small medical kit and one dedicated entirely to explosive tags. *When in doubt, blow shit up.*

Also not a Noguchi-ism, but wise nonetheless.

Sakura makes quick work of preparing the house to be empty for a couple weeks. Her parents both travel frequently for their business, and often for long periods of time, and so Sakura is well-versed in independent living. Neither parent is due back from their current excursion for at least another month, so she makes sure all of the windows are locked, the trash is taken out, and leaves a bundle of the perishable foods by the door of her neighbor whom she knows is at home.

Then she dashes back into her room to snag her pack, shrugging it onto her shoulders. Just as she's leaving her room, Sakura catches a glimpse of herself in her mirror and pauses. She looks…cool. Her haori looks practical yet elegant, her arm guards look tough, and her newly-earned scratches and bruises make her look like a warrior.

For the first time, Sakura really begins to feel like a shinobi.

This elated feeling lasts right up until she gets to the eastern village gate, where her team and the object of their mission await her arrival.

The tall, smelly, loud, *rude* object.

Sakura thanks the heavens for her reflexive politeness towards adults, because Tazuna is barely short of a nightmare. Despite having apparently made the choice to hire shinobi to be his detail, he holds them in an exceptionally low regard and has no qualms insulting the four of them, their profession, their general life choices, and in one memorable comment, Sasuke-kun's hairstyle.

Amusingly (to Sakura, anyway) Naruto is able to stomach some truly disdainful remarks about his dream to be Hokage, but the insult to their teammate is what pushes him over the edge and into violence.

"I apologize that our team is already failing to live up to your expectations," Sakura interjects in a saccharine voice while Kakashi-sensei physically bars Naruto from attacking the man. "Hopefully in the future, Konoha will be able to provide assistance with hair of the caliber that you so desire."

Tazuna blinks at her, nonplussed by the courteous tone. Naruto's reaction is what he wanted, but Sakura's brings him up short. He ceases with the insults from then on, choosing instead to grumble quietly to himself.

Sakura smiles to herself. Nothing shuts people up faster than making them feel foolish.

Kakashi-sensei tells them that the journey to the port will take about three days, because they have a civilian in tow and therefore cannot travel at shinobi-speeds.

"This will be a good opportunity for me to assess your general survival skills," he adds, which makes Sakura swallow a little nervously. Again, plenty of theoretical practice in the Academy (and they did do a couple overnight field-drills) but not much actual experience. She just hopes she doesn't have to gut any cute animals.

The first day of travel passes in monotony. Tazuna remains mostly quiet–though he and Kakashi-sensei appear to have a few, low-voiced discussions–and Naruto and Sasuke have regular cycles of civility and bickering.

They set up camp a ways off the road, and Sakura watches as Kakashi-sensei disappears into the trees to lay a few traps around their small perimeter. Sasuke and Naruto are busily arranging their bedrolls (and somehow turning even that into a competition) when he returns just a few short minutes later. Her teacher levels an expectant look at her, and she gets to work.

Sakura sniffs the air, trying to ignore the stench of Tazuna's booze-sweat.

Sensei's chakra. A little sulfur. Something metallic. She drifts towards her teacher, who continues to observe her silently, and sniffs him too. The sweet-sharp scent of chakra is a little stronger, but there's more—freshly overturned dirt, the wetness of moss.

"Hmm," she hums, head tipping to the side. It paints a vague picture, but Pakkun-sensei has drilled the basics into her well. "You put down motion-triggered seals that alert you to approaching enemies, around almost the whole perimeter. At least one or two pressure-activated shuriken traps, and…" She makes a face at him. "A giant log on a trip-wire? Really, sensei?"

It's the oldest trick in the book and nearly cartoonish in its simplicity. Then again, she did get nailed by that stupid boxing glove, so maybe she shouldn't criticize.

Kakashi-sensei just gives her that guileless eye-smile, and ruffles her hair. "Well done," he praises, which warms Sakura from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

Predictably, Naruto takes issue with the concept of traps in general, which strikes Sakura as a little ironic given his penchant for pranks.

“Ehhh,” he whines, plopping down on his bedroll to start digging through his backpack. “But traps are like…cheating! I wanna fight the bad guys n’ win!”

Kakashi-sensei sighs, sitting down to lean against a tree that Sakura knows is probably trapped to the gills. “When you’re in the field, it’s about surviving and completing the mission, not winning, ” he says, pulling out *Icha Icha.*

Sakura watches him as she unfurls her own bedroll, recalling a lesson from Pakkun-sensei.

“In war, every advantage, no matter how small, matters,” the pug says as Sakura tries to scrub a ridiculously sticky substance from the soles of her feet. She’s using sensei’s kitchen sink, which is a little uncouth, but whatever. The pressure-activated seal she’d stepped on had transformed into a giant sticky-trap—like the ones for bugs—all but gluing her feet to the floor.

Pakkun-sensei sensei continues, “Delaying your enemy for even just one more moment can mean the difference between rescuing a teammate and watching their throat get slit.”

The genin shudders a bit at the memory as she fidgets with her bedroll. She would *like* to put it right next to sensei’s or Sasuke-kun’s, but field protocol places the safety of the client well above her personal desires. As such, she selects a spot that orients Tazuna (who is already snoring in a heap) between her and her teacher, creating a defensive perimeter around him.

Sakura is too busy trying to get her bedroll to lay flat to see the approving glance that earns her.

Then, Naruto’s voice cuts through the dusk air.

“I’m starving!” he announces, and unearths what appears to be a somewhat-crushed cup-noodle. “Let’s eat!”

Sakura can't help but agree. They hadn't stopped for lunch, though her ramen-for-breakfast kept her pretty full for almost the whole day. Now that she's stopped moving, however, the exhaustion is finally catching up to her. *Inertia is a beast,* Sakura muses, suddenly feeling like she's made out of lead. It's hard to believe that her race with Lee *and* her spar with Sasuke-kun happened today.

"How exactly are you planning to cook that?" Sasuke-kun asks with a raised brow as he opens a ready-to-eat meal pouch. Sakura brought a few of those, plus several ration bars. She has some rice balls to eat tonight though, since they would've gone bad in her fridge anyway.

Naruto blinks. "We could…make a fire?" he suggests hesitantly.

"We could," sensei agrees easily. "But it's a relatively warm night, and it's best to avoid fires when possible. They attract all sorts of unwanted attention."

Naruto deflates, looking crestfallen. "Oh…" he says, and reluctantly puts the cup-noodle back into his backpack. When he fails to pull out anything else (and of *course* Naruto would pack nothing but ramen for a multi-day mission), Sakura tosses him two of her three rice balls.

"Catch, Naruto," she says, and he fumbles to do so.

Naruto gazes down at the rice balls like they're precious jewels. "Really, Sakura-chan?" he asks, looking so hopeful and disbelieving that Sakura almost regrets her decision. Has she really been *that* cruel to him, that offering him some day-old rice balls warrants such a response?

"We've gotta keep our energy up," she says instead of ducking her head away in shame, like she wants to. "This is our first C-rank, after all!"

“Y-yeah! Thanks, Sakura-chan!” the boy agrees, and quickly digs into the proffered food.

Then Naruto’s eyes widen into saucers, and Sakura wonders for a moment if she somehow managed to give him spoiled rice when he says, “This is so tasty! Sakura-chan, did you make these?”

Sakura stops herself from saying *duh, idiot,* because jeez, is that kind of attitude necessary at all? Sure, Naruto can be annoying and loud, but when did being mean to him become such a reflex? His only sin was to be a little obnoxious with his crush on her, but if Sakura were to take much issue with that, then…pot, kettle…

It’s different, part of her thinks. *My love for Sasuke-kun is different.*

But, is it really?

Sakura shakes off that train of thought, tabling it to be revisited another day. “Thanks, I did!” she finally responds. “They’re nothing special, just rice balls with filling.”

There’s a beat of silence, and blond uncharacteristically silent as he chews. Sympathy wells in Sakura’s belly. She’s ninety-nine percent certain he’s an orphan with no family to speak of. Regardless of his relationship with the hokage, it doesn’t seem like there’s anyone in his life who can show him how to function as a human. Sakura may be a fairly independent pre-teen now, but her mama and papa taught her everything she knows.

The next words from Sakura’s mouth tumble out before she can think better of it. “Want me to teach you how to make them?”

He blinks up at her, even more shocked this time. “Huh?”

She grins at him, surprising herself with how genuine it is. “I’ll teach you! They’re super easy, all you really need is rice and stuff to put inside.”

Hope blooms on his face like a flower in spring. “Like…like a date?”

Sakura’s smile flattens. “Like training,” she corrects. No point in leading him on or giving him false hope.

Somehow, that earns an even happier reaction. “Hell yeah!” he crows, “Rice ball training, believe it!”

He finishes one and goes to scarf down the other, then pauses. “Sakura-chan, what’s this?” he inquires, pointing at the rice ball. “It’s all wrinkly and weird!”

The pink-haired genin blinks. “That’s umeboshi. Pickled plum.” A slightly devious smile curls her lips. “Try it, I bet you’ll like it.”

Naruto shrugs and plucks it off the rice to pop the whole thing in his mouth.

When his lips practically fold in on themselves from the sourness, Sakura laughs harder than she has in a long, long time.

The second day of travel is equally monotonous as the first, right up until it’s not.

Sakura is busy tuning out a random lecture from Kakashi-sensei on geography (because she knows it all already) and practicing channeling chakra into her nose when it goes down. Augmenting her sense of smell is easy at this point, but she’s still got some work to do when it comes to quickly acclimating to the increased stimuli, and being able to parse out useful information from the sudden onslaught.

A few things happen in quick, if not simultaneous, succession.

There’s a spike of Kakashi-sensei’s chakra, but when she glances curiously at him, nothing seems amiss. He’s ambling along, hands in his pockets.

Much stronger, though, is the sudden scent of briny water. Sakura's nose wrinkles as she tenses and grabs a kunai–that has to be chakra. But whose—?

Then, all hell breaks loose—from a *puddle.*

Later, Sakura will kick herself for not noticing the giant puddle that shouldn't have existed, because it's the middle of spring and it hasn't rained for several days.

For now, though, Sakura is just trying to stay in one piece.

She swallows her cry of alarm as Kakashi-sensei is quite literally ripped to shreds by the chains—that spike of chakra meant something, so there's no way that's his real body. It's still a gory spectacle, however, and she averts her eyes.

The two attackers waste no time on zeroing in on their real target: Tazuna. Sakura throws herself in front of him as Sasuke-kun engages them head-on. It's *vicious.* Sakura watches as he cleverly pins their chain to a nearby tree, forcing them to release the deadly link between them.

Unsure of how to help, Sakura stands her ground, kunai drawn and chakra fizzling in her fingertips. When one of the attackers turns her way, Sakura just…waits. She *knows* she should do something, sage, *anything* but she's worried about Sasuke-kun and she's wondering where Kakashi-sensei went and Naruto is even more frozen than she is and she can't protect him and Tazuna at the same time—

Just a meatshield after all.

Then, just as suddenly as it started, it's over.

Sakura blinks and Kakashi-sensei is there, both assailants tucked under his arms like two violent bags of rice. He chokes them both out until they go limp before dropping them into a heap on the ground.

Tazuna flinches when Kakashi-sensei's gaze lands on him. "You have some explaining to do."

And explain he does. As soon as terms like *gang* and *crime magnate* start being thrown around, Sakura comes to two immediate conclusions: attempting to finish this mission is a terrible idea, but her team is definitely going to do it anyway. It's also deeply unnerving that even Kakashi-sensei is a little surprised at the bounty on this man's head. That means this is serious business.

As predicted, Naruto is hellbent on finishing the mission.

"I won't freeze up like I did earlier, pops," he declares to Tazuna. "I promise to protect you!"

The bridge-builder's expression twitches, doubt obvious, before it settles into something more sad. "Then I'll put my faith in you, kid."

Sakura observes Kakashi-sensei during this exchange, but his expression is totally unreadable. Suddenly, he claps his hands, startling Sakura.

"Slight change to the itinerary—we will be moving faster from now on. Tazuna-san, I will be carrying you while my cute students follow."

Tazuna looks like he wants to argue, but clearly thinks better of it. "Alright," he grumbles. He looks less than pleased about this development.

Sakura wants to sneer, but refrains. *Serves him right for lying and getting us into this mess.*

As Tazuna clambers awkwardly onto Kakashi-sensei's back, Sakura looks to the east. They're still pretty far from the coast, so it's all forest and rolling hills.

And trouble, Sakura thinks. *Nothing but trouble.*

Hope you enjoyed! And again, I hope I'm hitting a nice medium of fleshing out Kakashi a bit without making him OOC.

Comments make my day. I know I don't respond to them much (if ever) but I read them all and cherish them. I am just terribly awkward and have a low social bandwidth, but I really do appreciate every last one.

Next time: Sakura puts her speedy skills to the test to save her teammates, and Kakashi gets the surprise of a lifetime.

Let sleeping dogs lie

Chapter 7: Let sleeping dogs lie

AHAHAHA....hi. I'm back. I won't bother with the excuses, let's just get this party started!!

Thanks a million times to everyone who continues to follow, read, comment on, and leave kudos on this story. It means the world to me that you all find such enjoyment in my writing.

It might continue to be slow-going, but I WILL finish this story lol. I love it far too much to ever let it go.

unbeta'd so feel free to point out any mistakes!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Traveling with Tazuna on Kakashi-sensei’s back is much faster. So much faster, in fact, their teacher estimates they’ll shave an entire day off of their original travel time.

“We’ll reach the coast tomorrow afternoon,” Kakashi-sensei tells them as they set camp for their second night out. “From there, we’ll be connecting with Tazuna’s contact, who will take us to the island by boat. I would really like us to make it to our final destination before nightfall, so rest up tonight kiddies—we’re moving at speed tomorrow.”

Considering how punishing today’s pace felt, Sakura shudders to think what exactly that means.

From her bedroll, she watches as Kakashi-sensei once again vanishes into the trees to trap their perimeter. He’s gone for much longer this time, and does not ask her to identify them when he

returns. He does, however, inform them that there will be no taking turns with watch tonight.

Sakura fiddles with her backpack. “That doesn’t seem very sustainable,” she eventually says. “And don’t we need you in the best shape to fight?”

Sensei hums, handing Naruto a ready-to-eat meal pouch that he unsealed from a scroll (note to self: acquire many of those). “I never said it would be just me,” he responds cryptically, and Sakura frowns.

The mystery doesn’t last long, however. Sakura is returning from a pee break in the woods (and boy is it dificult to, er, *let go* when she might be being hunted by murderous ninjas) when she hears the tell-tale whuffing and clamor that heralds sensei’s ninken. Oh, thank the sage. Their summoning is both a relief and a delight; Sakura knows she can rely on them to protect her team, and to cheer her up.

At her arrival, the ninken immediately abandon Kakashi-sensei and run up to greet Sakura instead. Sakura first giggles at her teacher’s put-out expression, and then at the ticklish sensation of eight snuffling noses around her knees.

“Hi boys,” she greets warmly, and begins to work her way down the line with forehead-smooches.

“There’s *more?”* she can hear Naruto ask, which is confusing at first but then it occurs to Sakura that only she has had the privilege of morning play-time with the dogs.

Sakura quickly introduces all of the ninken, and isn’t surprised at all to find Sasuke drawn to Uhei and Naruto to Guruko; the latter looking almost like interspecies dopplegangers. Sakura gets a lapful of Pakkun. The rest of the dogs pile up around sensei while the snoring Tazuna is completely ignored.

For the first time since the Demon Brothers attack, Sakura feels the tension in her shoulders unwind just a bit.

“Let’s discuss strategy,” Kakashi-sensei says as he gives chin-scritches to Bull. “Any enemies we encounter will be of increasing caliber, so we’ll need to be a bit more organized than today.”

That gets his team’s attention right quick. Sakura shuffles forward on her bum until she’s sandwiched between Sasuke and Naruto, all three leaning towards their teacher with nervous expressions.

“Sakura and Naruto, your focus will be on keeping Tazuna and each other safe. You will not engage offensively unless ordered to do so,” he begins, and Sakura nods.

“Sasuke and I will work as a team, and will not engage enemies alone unless forced apart. Sakura and Naruto can provide backup if absolutely needed.”

This all sounds perfectly reasonable to Sakura, but Naruto is not so enthused, and whines, “Sensei, that’s so lame! I wanna fight too!”

“No,” Kakashi-sensei responds in a tone that brooks no argument. “This isn’t training, Naruto. It could be life and death. If I see any of you fooling around or disobeying orders, I’ll have to consider dismissing you from the team.”

That earns a stunned silence.

“Finally, if I tell you to run, you run. Do not argue, do not hesitate. Grab Tazuna only if it won’t prevent your escape. Am I understood?”

In unison, the genin nod.

Kakashi-sensei sighs, his stony affect suddenly replaced with a quiet weariness. “Good. Now get some sleep. I’ll wake you at first light.”

As she snuggles down into her bedroll, Sakura feels determination curl in her gut. *My team is awesome,* she thinks. *We’ve got this in*

the bag.

Scratch that, we don't have this in the bag. We absolutely, definitively, do not possess anything even marginally related to a bag or its contents.

…Is the thought now percolating in Sakura's head as she clutches a kunai so hard her knuckles are white. Everything went off the rails so freaking fast Sakura wonders if she doesn't have whiplash. The boat, the rabbit, the mist…and suddenly, Sakura is staring death in the face.

The scene is this: Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura are standing in a tight formation around Tazuna. There's a terrifying man covered in bandages holding sensei hostage in a sphere of water. There's a clone of the terrifying man standing on the bank between the genin of team seven and their sensei, who is, did she mention, being held hostage in a freaking *sphere of water!*

"Give me the bridge-builder and I'll consider letting your sensei live," the clone growls, swinging his massive sword to and fro. The original on the water also has a sword, and really, it isn't fair that clone technique also copies weapons because just one of those gigantic, savage-looking blades is more than enough drama for the moment, Sakura thinks somewhat hysterically.

Sakura glances at Tazuna, mind rapidly calculating the odds of emerging from this scenario with everyone in one piece. It's not looking great. Tazuna catches her eye and must read the grimly thoughtful expression on her face as weighing the option of handing him over, because he frowns and says, "Did I mention I have a grandson whose father died tragically, leaving my daughter alone to care for him?"

Her eye twitches. No, he hadn't mentioned that. And frankly, she really wishes he hadn't.

“That’s convenient,” Sasuke mutters, glaring at their charge.

“And true!” the bridge-builder retorts.

“Tick, tock, brats,” the clone says. “You have ten seconds before I gut you all like fish and hang you up by your entrails.”

Crap. Sakura’s focus switches to Kakashi-sensei, who is gesturing rather violently with his arms in a cutting motion from within the watery prison. He’s also shouting something, a one-syllable command, but it’s completely muffled by the chakra-manipulated water. If Sakura *had* to guess, he’s probably yelling *Run!*

But technically she can’t hear the order, and the mask prevents any lip-reading, so as far as Sakura is concerned, she doesn’t have to follow it. (The actual tenability of this sentiment will have to be investigated at a later date.)

“Eight seconds,” Zabusa drawls.

There’s no way her team can beat this guy in a brawl, and he’s already demonstrated his repertoire of incredibly high-powered jutsu. The *only* thing on Team Seven’s side is the element of surprise. If they can disrupt his focus, or better yet, physically separate him from the water prison…then Kakashi-sensei will be free, and can handle the rest.

Hopefully.

“Naruto,” she snaps. “Make as many clones as you can and dogpile him. Sasuke, you guard Tazuna.”

Both boys look at her with nervous skepticism, and some derision on Sasuke’s part. “Sakura—”

Sakura wants to snap her teeth at him. Another habit picked up from the ninken. “Just trust me, okay?”

“Five seconds.”

Sasuke twitches and the pink-haired genin is pretty sure she can *hear* his molars grinding together in annoyance. “Fine,” he grunts. “Don’t fuck up.”

Sakura doesn’t answer, and instead takes off at a sprint for the edge of the lake. There’s an explosion of the ever-multiplying clamor of Naruto’s clones and the noise of their violent dispersions from behind her, but she’s got to focus. She has to time this perfectly, and she’s only going to get one shot.

Zabuza lifts his sword, waiting.

She hurls a barrage of steel at him, but he simply bats the weapons out of the air with his massive blade. Sakura does not falter, and continues to race towards the shore, heart pounding a fierce tattoo against her ribs. Kakashi-sensei is now full-on flailing in the water sphere, and really he should try to conserve his oxygen, shouldn’t he?

C’mon, c’mon! A volley of shuriken traveling in a particularly ferocious downwards arc prompts Zabuza to raise the blade above his head and, *yes, finally!*

Chakra floods her body from tip to toe.

With a prayer, Sakura flickers forward, closing the gap between her and the terrifying man in one great leap. She does not aim for him directly, no—her feet slam into the sword that is held above his head, and with another burst of chakra Sakura twists, launching downward from it like a springboard.

Shannaro!

She swings the kunai gripped in both hands with the brutality of an executioner’s axe, and between one heartbeat and the next, Sakura amputates Zabuza’s left arm from just below the elbow.

The next few moments are a blur. Sakura has no time to wince at the crunch of flesh and bone because she's falling, and the water prison is dispersing, and oh, that's a foot coming towards her, isn't i—

An explosion of pain. Her ribs creak like rotten floorboards and every last molecule of oxygen is robbed from her lungs by the brutal impact, but even that gets overshadowed by the explosion of white noise and stinging agony as she hits the water some ways away.

Sakura gasps, desperate for air, but swallows frigid lake water instead.

Her body locks up, and everything is getting dark, somehow unbearably loud and terribly silent all at once. Agonizing moments pass and Sakura flails weakly, but she can't even discern which way is up, let alone claw her way to the surface.

Please…Sasuke-kun…sensei…please…

However, just before Sakura can succumb to the overwhelming darkness, there is light, bright and searing–and noise, and *air,* forced into her lungs, and earth beneath her back. Pulse pounding and diaphragm seizing with the need to work overtime, Sakura gasps and gasps and gasps.

The warm shadow above her is making some sort of noise, perhaps words, but Sakura cannot parse a single thing beyond the discomfort in her body and the animal panic still clawing at the back of her skull.

She has just enough time to shove the warm shadow away so she can roll onto her side, vomiting up water and bile and mucus. Oh, sage. Snot is dripping down her chin and Sakura can't help the sudden shivers that start to wrack her body. She's alive. *She's alive.*

Consciousness becomes hard to properly cling to, and things start to blur. Where is she? How long has it been? Is Zabuza gone?

"*—bastard, how dare you take advantage of Sakura while she's—*"

"*—it's called CPR, dipshit—"*

"—you goddamn—"

"—shut up, both of you—"

Then, something touches her face. It's warm and smooth but wet—a hand, perhaps?

"Sakura-chan, can you hear me?"

Sensei's voice. It's like music to her ears.

"Kakashi-sensei," she gurgles. It sounds more *Gagazshi-zenzei,* but whatever.

He sighs in relief, and Sakura's vision finally starts to obey her a little. He's crouched and leaning over her, soaked to the bone and a little beat up, but in one piece.

"Tazuna…?" she wonders, dread pooling in her belly.

"Alive," he says with a cheerful curve to his eye that doesn't really suit the atmosphere of the situation. "Zabuza…well, it's a little complicated."

Sakura doesn't think can handle anything more complicated than simply trying to exist right now, so she doesn't press for more information.

Then, something strange happens. Sensei's eye twitches, and his body seems to sway.

"Oh my," he says mildly. "I might have overdone it. Using the Sharingan really takes it out of me."

And then he proceeds to pass out directly on top of Sakura, knocking what little breath she had managed to assemble right back out of her lungs.

Sakura is sulking.

She's also dutifully guarding their still-unconscious sensei, nose and ears enhanced and kunai at the ready–but first and foremost, she's sulking.

My first ever kiss, and from Sasuke-kun no less…and I was out cold. This sucks!

And it does. Logically, Sakura knows that it was actually CPR and not a kiss and never would have even happened in the first place if she hadn't been unconscious/near death…but still! It sucks!

At least she can lord this over Ino when they get back to Konoha. Sasuke-kun gave her mouth-to-mouth to save her life…it's straight out of a fairy tale!

Sakura doesn't have long to silently squeal to herself as she envisions a dramatized replay of the events (no barfing this time, thank you) because the figure of Kakashi-sensei's limp form catches her eye, dousing any feelings of cheer immediately. He's been out cold for nearly eighteen hours, which is starting to bump up against the wrong end of the bell curve for post-chakra exhaustion recovery time.

She watches him for a moment, before shuffling over until she's kneeling behind his head. The look on his face isn't peaceful, despite his deep level of unconsciousness. There are tension lines around his eyes and light sweat beading on his temple.

Cautiously, Sakura reaches out and pokes his cheek.

Nothing.

She pokes it again. Still nothing. Another poke, then a gentle tweak of his cloth-covered nose. Not even a twitch.

She’s going to tug on his ears when a hand snaps out and snatches her wrist, stalling the motion.

“Kakashi-sensei!” she cries, nearly falling over backwards at the sudden movement. “You’re awake!”

“Oof,” he moans. “My everything hurts.”

Sakura lets out a teary giggle at that. “You scared us, sensei. How are you feeling?”

Kakashi slowly sits up with a groan, apparently taking stock of his injuries and general state of being. “Not great,” he mumbles honestly. “But I’ll get there. Where are the boys?”

Sakura hands him a bottle of water and then spins around on her knees to allow him some privacy. His trust is important to her…she had literally snapped her teeth at the boys when they tried to peek under his mask, earlier. “Sasuke and Naruto are guarding the bridge,” she informs him. “I’m holding down the fort here. We figured that if that demon guy comes back, he’ll prioritize targeting Tazuna, so we’re concentrating firepower closest to him.”

Kakashi-sensei hums. “I take it that you’ve figured out that he’s not dead.”

There’s a light tap on her shoulder, and Sakura takes it to mean she can turn back around. She does.

After resettling in a cross-legged position, Sakura swallows, feeling trepidation build in her gut. “Naruto and Sasuke-kun explained to me what happened after I blacked out,” she murmurs, one hand going to anxiously play with her sandal strap. “It’s just…it’s way too convenient to be true.”

Kakashi-sensei nods at that. “Mm. I’ve never seen a real hunter nin flee with the body, either. They typically behead and then burn them immediately.”

The pink-haired genin grimaces a little at the mental image, before another worrisome thought comes to mind. “Sensei, he’s going to come after Tazuna again, isn’t he?” she asks. “And now he has backup. Strong backup.”

Kakashi-sensei scratches the back of his neck. “Most likely, yes.”

Her stomach turns. That was the answer she expected, but it doesn’t make it any less unsettling.

Sensing her discomfort, he then says, “Don’t worry, Sakura-chan. Your sensei is much stronger than him, and I’ve got thrice the backup.”

Sakura would argue that is a vast overestimation of at least her abilities, but she accepts the compliment and reassurance with a small, genuine smile anyways.

“Besides,” her teacher continues, tone a little wry. “He’s down one arm, thanks to you. That’s a pretty serious handicap for a swordsman.”

Sakura bites her lip. She wants to revel in that accomplishment, but can’t muster enough enthusiasm to break past the anxiety. “He seems like the kind of person to just surgically attach a knife in its place,” she mutters.

That earns a genuinely thoughtful *hmm.* “You might be onto something there. Thankfully, even though those senbon didn’t kill him, it’s enough to incapacitate him for roughly seventy-two hours.”

Sakura does the math. “That leaves us with about fifty-two hours until he recovers.” Not *nearly* enough time, in her opinion.

“Guess I’d better get going on my own recovery, then,” he muses. “And speaking of recovering, how are *you* feeling, my cute little speed-demon? That was a pretty hard blow you took.”

Here it is. The lecture she's been expecting. Presumably in regards to both practicing something as dangerous as the flicker by herself and using it in combat, *and* ignoring orders, even if she physically couldn't really hear them. *May as well get this over with.*

"My ribs hurt a little," she tells him honestly. "They don't seem broken, only bruised. And my throat is sore from inhaling the water, but that's about it."

"I'm glad to hear it," he says, and his tone seems honest. "Now, walk me through the rationale of not fleeing when I had directly ordered you to earlier."

Sakur winces. "Sensei…"

He holds up his hands placatingly. "I'm asking genuinely. I want to understand why you chose to do what you did."

Sakura bites her lip. This doesn't seem like a trap…Kakashi usually just jumps straight to the sermon without any theatrical pretense. His gaze is inquisitive rather than admonishing, so Sakura just lets out a small sigh and tries to find the words.

"After you got caught, I knew our only options were to free you or run," she begins, picking at a loose thread on her haori. "Then Zabuza started counting down, and I…I dunno. I just knew he was gonna try 'n kill us anyway if we ran."

Her eyes search Kakashi-sensei's face for a reaction but he just nods understandingly, so she keeps going.

"I figured the only chance we had was to catch him off guard, and I could tell he didn't think I was a threat." Going forward, Sakura will be grateful to be underestimated, at least in life-and-death situations.

She resumes picking at the thread. "Honestly, I don't know if I would've run even if I thought we could get away," Sakura admits

quietly, before finding his gaze once more. “I don’t ever wanna leave you behind. Or the boys. Even if you order me to. Is that…wrong?”

Kakashi-sensei *hmms* consideringly. “It’s very rare that anything is simply wrong or right,” he responds. “As shinobi, we exist pretty firmly in a nebulous zone between the two, occasionally occupying one side more than the other.”

Yeah, that sounds about right. Some days Sakura helps little old ladies with their groceries and some days she cuts people’s arms off. It’s a balance, she supposes.

The memory of amputating the missing-nin’s arm turns her stomach. The crunch of bone, the snap of sinew…even in the tumultuous heat of the moment, it echoes in her mind with discomfiting clarity. There’s a person out there, missing-nin or not, who *doesn’t have a hand* anymore. Because of her. Somehow, it’s a more disturbing idea than the thought of ending his life.

Unable to smother the anxiety suddenly prickling under her skin, Sakura asks, “Do you think he’ll come after me? Like, specifically? Since, I…?” She flaps her left hand weakly to say what her mouth can’t.

Kakashi-sensei’s eye curves into a crescent, though it’s anything but cheerful. “He might,” Kakashi-sensei answers quietly. “I’ll kill him if he tries.”

It’s said lightly, but Sakura knows that her teacher is deadly serious. And though grim in their nature, the words do comfort her, and she offers him a shaky, grateful smile in return.

Then, another thought occurs to her. “Sensei, right before you passed out, you said something.”

His head tilts curiously.

“You said that the sharingan really takes it out of you. That was the red eye thingy, right?” she asks, pointing to her own left eye.

He chuckles. “Yes, it is the *red eye thingy.”*

Sakura’s lips twist in thought. “Sasuke-kun was muttering up a storm after the fight, about bloodlines and stuff, but when I asked him to explain he just stomped off.”

“He does that sometimes.”

Sakura shrugs, even though the accurate reply to that would be *sure does.* “Can you tell me about it?”

Kakashi-sensei’s response is to sheepishly scratch the back of his neck and say, “Probably better saved for a later time,” which is disappointing, but ultimately understandable. *Dang.*

Sakura nods and doesn’t push, instead pulling out *Kuzushi no ri* so she can flip through it for the umpteenth time. The demonstration of restraint seems to surprise her teacher and he pauses.

“What, no wheedling? You’re usually so nosy,” he teases, reaching out to tweak her nose gently like she’d done to him earlier. Then, mild horror crosses his face. “Hold on, you’re not getting bored of your super cool sensei, are you?”

Sakura snaps her teeth after his fingers as he pulls them away. “I wasn’t raised by wolves, sensei. You just seem exhausted.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Kakashi-sensei mutters. “Well, since you’re being so polite, I’ll give you the short version.”

Sakura blinks, confused. “But—” she cuts herself off. Kakashi-sensei rarely makes sense, she reasons. *Just let him talk.*

She watches quietly as her teacher seems to mull over his words. Several long seconds pass.

“It was a gift,” he says eventually, which is not informative at *all* and carries so many grim connotations that Sakura opts to just nod in response, at the risk of saying something insensitive. The gift of a functional organ means the person was still alive long enough to hand it over willingly, because Kakashi-sensei doesn’t seem like the kind of person to accept such a thing if it were taken by force. A heavy silence permeates the room.

Oof. The genin figures that will be that, but then he surprises her by continuing to speak. “Since it wasn’t mine originally, it’s a constant drain on my chakra. Using it actively is especially harsh.”

Now *that* is surprising. “Even with the tenketsu closed?”

It doesn’t seem like it should be physically possible. Tenketsu work in a binary system: they’re either open or closed, and as far as Sakura can tell, they don’t leak. Then again…chakra lets people spew fire from their mouths and summon beings from other worlds, she muses. There’s probably *some* wiggle room in the specifics of it all.

His sheepishness returns. “Well, that’s the thing. I haven’t closed the tenketsu in this eye since I got it.”

What? Sakura positively goggles at the admission. “Why?!” she demands, aghast. *That can’t be safe! Or comfortable!*

He’s quiet for a moment. “Honestly, I’m not sure how to do it safely. The transplant was performed in the field under suboptimal conditions, so it’s possible some wires got crossed. I only have middling chakra control, and I’m worried about damaging my eye if I screw it up.”

Ahhh, okay. Sakura assumes that *suboptimal conditions* translates to *in the midst of harrowing battle* in sensei-speak, so it must have been a pretty brutal scenario. It’s a reasonable fear to have. That being said…

“So, if you had really good control like me, you could do it?” she wonders, head tilting curiously.

The idea seems to give him pause. “...Perhaps.”

Sakura hums thoughtfully. “Well, the sharingan lets you copy stuff, including chakra-molding, right? Why not try and copy me closing and opening my tenketsu and see if that helps? I *can* do it perfectly, you know.”

Kakashi-sensei blinks, looking more openly shocked than she’s ever seen him. It’s a brazen suggestion to be sure, but they’ve got a date with a crazy man whose sword literally eats blood and the extent of Team Seven’s firepower currently consists of three minors and sensei’s half-dead ass, so. Desperate times, desperate measures and all that.

“I…don’t know. I’d never considered it.”

“Well, let’s try! Here.” Sakura scooches over until she’s sitting in a cross-legged position before him. With much propriety she snatches up both of his hands, bringing them to cup the sides of her head and holding them there. He tries to tug away perfunctorily, but she simply glares and clamps down with a bit of chakra-enhanced strength. His palms are warm and dry and his hands are so big they practically cradle her entire head. It feels nice.

“I’m gonna start pulling your chakra in with mine,” she informs him. “Open your eye!”

He obeys, and then twitches a little when her chakra wraps around his, tugging it gently along for the ride. Together, their chakra ventures from their touching hands and into her head, which feels strange but similar enough to medical chakra that it doesn’t bother her. Sakura shuts her eyes to focus, the ghost image of the red sharingan floating for a few moments behind her eyelids.

Sakura moves her chakra slowly and deliberately to hopefully allow maximum retention of the ability. Sage only knows if this will even work, but she sure hopes it will.

Once their chakra reaches its destination, having painstakingly snaked up through her coils, Sakura carefully opens and closes her tenketsu. She repeats the process a few times for good measure, going through the familiar motions of pushing out and then reeling it back in. It's kinda weird to have Kakashi-sensei's chakra there as well. It's almost embarrassing, in the same way that collecting your change from a cashier while someone waits behind you is embarrassing.

Despite the added pressure, however, her control proves to be as unflappable as usual, and the tenketsu open and close smoothly. Perfectly, one might even say. Finally, she closes them one last time, before accompanying Kakashi-sensei's chakra back out of her head and into its owner's body.

Sakura opens her eyes to find that Kakashi-sensei's are still closed. He has unfairly long eyelashes, she notes. Why are long eyelashes always wasted on men who will never appreciate them?

She relinquishes his hands and they linger on her cheeks for a moment before falling slowly to his lap.

"Come on, your turn," Sakura coaxes. Feeling bold, she moves to cup his face instead. "I'll supervise."

Probably not necessary, but she's never poked around in someone else's tenketsu before and wants a go. Creepy? Maybe, but Sakura doesn't really care.

Kakashi-sensei's eyes open to level her with a flat stare and he tugs her hands away, but instead of releasing them he keeps them clasped in his own. His grip tightens minutely, and Sakura realizes abruptly that sensei is *nervous.* It's an incredibly strange concept. She's seen him annoyed, amused, angry, even furious when it

looked like Zabusa had them on the ropes…but somehow this nervousness is the most remarkable disruption of his usual aloofness.

Then the sharingan vanishes in a swirl, leaving an ordinary gray pupil behind.

Sakura holds her breath, suddenly terrified that he might never be able to activate it again. *Oh sage, what have I—*

Just as swiftly, the blood-red reappears, tomoe spinning into view, and Sakura wilts with relief. His eye rapidly cycles three more times between red and gray before finally settling on the latter.

“Fuck,” Kakashi-sensei breathes in a rare moment of total sincerity.

“It worked!” Sakura shrieks with pure joy, flinging her arms around his neck. Kakashi-sensei lets her, leaning back on one palm to take her weight as he wraps the other loosely around her waist to steady her. “It worked, it worked, it *worked!”*

Sakura sits back, positively giddy, and grips his shoulders. “How does it feel?” she demands, before grabbing his chin and turning his face this way and that. His eye looks so *normal.* Sakura uses the other hand to pull his eyelid open even wider, and it's this that gets her pushed out of his lap and dumped on her bum.

“Rude,” she pouts. “Is that any way to treat the person who just solved your chakra exhaustion problem?”

Kakashi-sensei blinks at her. “What’s your favorite food?” he asks, apropos of absolutely nothing.

Nonplussed, Sakura responds, “Anmitsu. Why?”

Her sensei just nods as if that makes sense. The tension is bleeding out of his shoulders and what she can see of his face.

“Because for the first time in nearly thirteen years, I don’t have a headache. I’m going to buy you a lifetime supply of animitsu when we get home from this mission.”

That elicits a delighted laugh from Sakura. “Sensei, you don’t have to do that. I’m just really happy I could help you at all.”

“Mmm,” he responds, eyes drooping, and abruptly looking like he’s ready to get aboard another snooze cruise. Understandable, really. If Sakura was freed from a thirteen-year headache, the first thing she would probably do is nap, too.

“You should get some more rest,” she says softly. “You said Zabuza will probably still need another forty-eight hours to recover, right? May as well recoup as much energy as possible before then.”

Kakashi-sensei yawns behind his mask, and it’s probably the most normal, human thing she’s ever seen him do. *Weird.*

Her teacher then proceeds to dig his thumb into a scratch on his arm, summon Pakkun, direct the pug to be on watch, then flop over and pass out all in the span of about eight seconds.

Scooching closer, Sakura peers down at his face. Now, instead of a pinched expression, the visible part of his face is slack with the relaxation of a deep and restful sleep. He looks younger. The genin smiles to herself, pleased as a peach at the accomplishment. *And* she gets animitu out of it? Not a bad deal.

If I survive this mission, her brain helpfully supplies. The impending battle works swiftly to dampen her spirits, and Sakura spends the next hour kneeling behind Kakashi-sensei’s head, kunai clutched in one hand and the palm of the other resting on Pakkun’s back. The ticking of the clock on the wall seems to grow louder with every second that passes, and by the time that Naruto, Sasuke, and Tazuna return to the house, Sakura has given herself a headache from clenching her jaw so hard.

Kakashi-sensei sleeps through dinner, but Sakura requests to set a portion aside and keep by his futon in case he wakes in the night hungry. The only real treatment options for chakra exhaustion are rest and calories, and she wants to make sure he doesn't skimp on either.

It's not until she's practically falling asleep into her own bowl of rice that Sakura realizes that she might need to lay down for a bit as well.

"Take a kip," Pakkun tells her. "You've been on watch all day."

"Mmm," Sakura not-agrees, hunching over Kakashi-sensei's lightly-snoring form. Distantly, she realizes that she's getting a little fixated, and the exhaustion is not really helping, but mainly she just keeps thinking about Zabuza's terrifying sword and imagining what kind of horrifying maw he's hiding under all of those bandages. Huge, razor-sharp teeth? A vicious scar? A double-hinged jaw that can expand to *swallow a human whole—*

"Sakura-chan, we got this."

The genin blinks, startled by the unusually somber tone from Naruto. He plops down near her, close enough to be present but not so close it crowds her. "The bastard is keeping watch on the roof, me 'n fuzzbutt will hold down the fort in here. You need to sleep. I'll wake you in a couple hours, 'kay?"

"Mmmmmm," Sakura grumbles again, but this time she's already curling up into a ball on her own futon, which she's dragged over to put by sensei's just in case. "Wake me up when he wakes up, alright?"

Naruto salutes her. "Roger!"

With one hand still clutching a kunai to her chest like a stuffed animal, Sakura sleeps.

Sakura using her big brain to solve problems, hell yeah!! It was fun to have a bit more action this chapter, and I think it was high time Sakura got to show off a bit :3

I hope you all enjoyed. Also, absolutely GIGANTIC shout-out and love to ssilcatt on tumblr, who blessed me with incredible sketches of RRD and treated me to some extra special sneak peeks of her WIPs. Her art is astoundingly beautiful, please go lavish it with the love it deserves!!!

Comments make my day and inspire me. Love you guys!! And I'd love to hear your thoughts on Sakura's solution to Kakashi's eye problem. it seems like one of those choices that could be polarizing, so I'm curious!

Next time: team 7 discovers that a well-rested Kakashi-sensei is a force to be reckoned with. and ofc, battle on the bridge!!

Greet with your teeth

Chapter 8: Greet with your teeth

I'm back!!!

can i just say....WOW. you guys are fucking amazing. so many kind, thoughtful comments. literally i read most of them multiple times they made me so happy. i hope you all know your sweet words fuel me!!! THANK YOU!!

chapter 8 coming in at a nice n crisp 7.4k. hope you enjoy! and pls point out spelling/grammar mistakes, this is unbeta'd.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When Sakura wakes, she feels well-rested.

Too well-rested.

The genin sits up, aggressively scrubbing the lingering sleep from her eyes. The light filtering through the small window tells her that it’s late morning, and not only that, Kakashi-sensei’s futon is very much sans silver-haired occupant and is folded up neatly next to her own.

“Naruto,” she growls, tossing off the covers and scrambling to her feet. He was supposed to alert her when Kakashi-sensei woke up!

She stomps into the kitchen, hoping to find the orange menace so she can strangle him, but comes face to face with—

“Sasuke-kun, good morning,” she greets, a bit less sunnily than usual.

“It’s almost noon,” he growls, as if that’s *her* fault and not, you know, a result of the ever-advancing march of space-time.

Sakura squashes the instinctual reaction to roll her eyes, and instead tries to focus on the elegant slope of Sasuke’s nose and his feathery, dark eyelashes. Even grumpy, he’s freaking cute.

“Naruto was supposed to wake me when sensei got up,” she returns while attempting (rather fruitlessly) to finger-comb her bed-head.

“Sensei said to let you rest,” he grunts, leaning against the kitchen table. “He also bitched at us for letting you sleep with a knife, so don’t do that anymore.”

Sakura blinks. Yeah, now that she thinks about it, the kunai she fell asleep gripping (whoops) is nowhere to be found. She hazards a peek at the pouch still strapped to her belt (also whoops) and finds it one short. Hm.

But that hardly matters. What Sakura really wants to know is, “Where is sensei?”

“He’s already at the bridge with Naruto and Tazuna,” he informs her. “Now that you’re awake, I’m heading there too.”

That stops her short. “What about me?”

He gives her a dry look. “You’re supposed to guard the house,” he says slowly. As if it should be obvious.

Sakura swallows, throat clicking from sudden dryness. “By myself?” The question isn’t quite a squeak, but it’s pretty damn close.

Like. Thanks for the faith, Kakashi-sensei, but also there’s a psychotic missing-nin roaming out and about, whom it is worth mentioning she recently shorted one limb, and thus perchance might be seeking some sort of revenge…? *Just a thought.*

“Zabuza is still down for at least another day and a half,” the boy reminds her, voice losing some of its crabby edge. “And there’s like, ten Naruto clones outside helping Tsunami-san with chores, plus sensei left a couple of his dogs.”

Sakura relaxes minutely at that. And then feels a little dumb for assuming sensei would just leave her high and dry. “Oh. Cool.”

The boy pushes off of the counter and starts to head for the door when he pauses. “What did you do to him, anyway?”

Sakura freezes. “What did I do to who?”

That earns an eye-roll. “Sensei. He’s acting all…cheerful. It’s weird.”

Ohhh. Sakura manages to squash the giddy smile that wants to curl her lips, but just barely. “Sensei’s always cheerful,” she demures, which is true. Just cheerful in his own weird Kakashi-sensei way. “I just gave him some tips on how to deal with chronic headaches. Was he still wearing his headband like an eyepatch?”

Now Sasuke-kun looks *very* suspicious. “Yeah, why?”

Crap. “Uh, just curious,” she deflects poorly. An abrupt realization is that sensei might want to conceal the eye thing until this mission is resolved. His increased chakra levels constitute an advantage, technically, and those are always best kept close to the chest until necessary.

When Sasuke-kun’s gaze just narrows, she babbles on, straight-up lying now, “His headaches are related to depth perception, which the eyepatch interferes with, and growing up I had a lazy eye and—”

“Whatever,” Sasuke-kun cuts her off, looking more and more alarmed by the prospect of having to learn something personal about Sakura. “I’m leaving. Tsunami-san says there’s food in the fridge if you want it.”

Sakura breathes an internal sigh of relief. “Thanks, Sasuke-kun.”

He makes a beeline for the front door, already geared up other than his sandals. *He’s probably been going bonkers,* she realizes with some guilt, *stuck in here babysitting me while Naruto is out in the field.*

Before he can close the door behind him and she can think better of it, Sakura darts forward a step to get his attention. “Hey,” she says quietly. “Stay safe. And keep an eye on Naruto and sensei for me.”

He just grunts, but after a beat follows it with a nod, which Sakura decides to interpret as *thank you, Sakura, you’re always so thoughtful, Sakura.*

Then he’s gone.

Sakura stares at the door for a second before spinning on her heel to start the day. With exceptional efficiency, she freshens up, scarfs down some rice and fish, and finally heads outside to help with chores.

Island housekeeping is, she discovers quickly, quite different from mainland housekeeping. Whereas at home Sakura might help with sweeping the porch or weeding her mother’s small garden bed, here she is handed a paint-scraper and instructed to pry barnacles and mussels off of the bottom of somewhat-neglected the family skiff. The barnacles are dumped into a bucket to be used in crabbing traps, whereas the mussels are put on ice so they can be cleaned and cooked up later. It’s actually quite meditative, once she gets the hang of it.

It’s nice, just doing domestic things for a little bit with a maternal figure. Tsunami-san is kind. Ever since Sakura became a genin, she's been giving her all to her training and missions, and her parents have been away a lot on work. Her dad especially, since spring is his busiest season. They don't spend nearly as much time

together anymore, and she sometimes does miss family dinners, or sitting in her mother's office, watching her cut and sew and craft.

Hours crawl by, but the ninken (Bull, Urushi, Shiba, and Pakkun this time) are never summoned away so she assumes there hasn't been any combat on the bridge. When indoors, Sakura finds her eyes drifting to the clock more often than not.

Forty hours left. Then thirty six. By the time the rest of Team Seven and Tazuna return, there is approximately thirty two or so hours until Zabuza could be back up and murderous again.

Sakura greets them anxiously at the door, using her nose to assess their wellbeing. They all smell fine, if a little sweaty. It quells the nerves fluttering in her stomach a bit.

"How's your, um, headache, sensei?" she asks as the boys trot off to wash up.

"Never better," he smiles, reaching over to ruffle her hair before he bends to slip his sandals off.

And Sakura kind of believes him. Everything about him is just a smidgen more relaxed than usual. Less tension around his eyes, an easier slope to his shoulders. Even his skin seems like it has a bit more color to it.

Well, he did suffer from chronic chakra exhaustion for thirteen years, she muses. Despite the ambient anxiety, Sakura still feels pretty freaking proud of having helped him solve such a persistent problem.

He asks for a report of the day's happenings and she rattles on off, even though the most exciting part was when a wasp stung Bull's rump and he spent several minutes sprinting in circles and howling, much to the amusement of the other ninken. Kakashi-sensei chuckles at that, and then thanks her for her hard work keeping the house safe.

During dinner, Kakashi-sensei informs them that the routine will be changing a bit.

“Starting tomorrow, all three of you will be with me on the bridge,” he says.

Sakura blinks, startled. “We’re not leaving anyone to guard the house?” she asks, gaze sliding over to where Tsunami-san sits. However, the woman appears unperturbed. Perhaps she and Kakashi-sensei had discussed this already.

“Not you three, no. Zabuza isn’t the type to take hostages. He’ll go wherever Tazuna is,” her teacher responds. Then he points at Sakura with his chopsticks. “And maybe where you are.”

Sakura gulps. *Fantastic.*

“Zabuza can’t be the only mercenary on Gato’s payroll, though,” Sasuke-kun interjects. “And he *does* seem like the type to take hostages.”

Sakura nods in agreement, as does Naruto. He’s got a point. There’s nothing stopping the crime lord from sending his other, lesser goons to kidnap and/or otherwise imperil Tazuna’s family.

“All true,” Kakashi-sensei nods. “However, Zabuza is almost certainly the only one of his caliber. If Gato had anyone else like that in his corner he would have sent them after us by now. I’ll be leaving a clone and a couple of the ninken here, which should be enough to take care of any pests.”

The rest of dinner is a quiet affair, until Naruto asks about a torn picture on the wall. The story of Kaiza is heartbreaking and takes the mood from bad to worse, and then of course her teammate goes and antagonizes an already upset Inari. Sakura keeps her mouth shut, watching with some concern as her blonde teammate goes stomping after the little boy. *Great.* The last thing this situation needs is *more* conflict.

She’s just made the decision to follow them when a hand drops down on her shoulder.

“Kakashi-sensei,” Sakura acknowledges him, a little startled.

“Let them be,” he says.

Sakura’s brow crinkles with skepticism. “Are you sure? Naruto can be—”

“Remarkably empathetic,” he finishes for her, squeezing her shoulder briefly before letting his hand fall. “Besides, I need your assistance with something.”

Which is how Sakura ends up perched on Kakashi-sensei’s back, sandwiched between Bull and Urushi as the man does *one-fingered push-ups.* One-fingered! Sakura would be amazed at the display of physical prowess if she wasn’t seething with jealousy. She can barely do a few normal ones, and here sensei is knocking out sets of fifty on one freaking finger.

Oh, to have a Y-chromosome, she sighs internally, and pokes critically at her own meager biceps. Sure, they’re way bigger than they were just a month prior thanks to play-time with the ninken and her own training regimen, but she’s still got a long way to go before she qualifies as anything other than *small, low muscle-to-mass ratio.*

Suddenly, a thought occurs to Sakura and she gasps so loudly that both dogs startle with a yelp. The resulting flurry of limbs causes the whole ensemble to topple over, and the genin finds herself tangled up in a groaning pile of dog and sensei.

“Oof,” Kakashi-sensei wheezes, propping himself up on an elbow so he can see Sakura’s face. “What on earth was that about?”

Sakura spits out a few strands of her hair. “Lee!” she cries, trying to dislodge Bull who has apparently decided that he likes this puppy-

pile and is not budging at all. “I totally forgot to tell him I’m on a mission! He’s gonna think I’m standing him up for training!”

Sakura has never had an eternal rival before but ghosting hers on their first official training session seems like a terrible faux pas, and Lee is probably the kind of person who would give her the benefit of the doubt and wait for *hours.* She suddenly has a vision of a forlorn Lee, stranded in the pouring rain as he waits for her, unaware of the futility of it all. For some reason in this vision he is also sitting in a beat-up cardboard box that says *free to a good eternal rival* which is, okay, maybe a little bit of an overdramatization but *still!* Haruno Sakura doesn’t stand people up!

Kakashi-sensei flops back to the floor dramatically with a whooshing sigh. “That’s *it?”* he grumps and then begins to extract himself from the tangle.

Sakura’s lip wobbles, and on some embarrassing impulse she clings to one of his legs. She’s not sure if it’s the impending battle or what, but her cry-fuse seems to be even shorter than usual. And really, she knows it’s not *that* big of a deal, but she was really excited to start training with Lee. He was supposed to help her learn Judo. And he seemed like he could be…a friend, too. Not just a rival. Sakura doesn’t think she’s made a friend, a real one, since Ino.

Apparently sensing the oncoming waterworks, Kakashi-sensei puts his escape attempt on hold. Eventually, he says, “Gai and I keep tabs on each other’s mission assignments. Chances are he already knows, and relayed it to Lee.”

Sakura blinks, mystified. *Keep tabs?* That’s…oddly sweet. “Oh.”

“Mm.”

There’s a lull, and Sakura can feel her teacher start to once again wriggle his way free from the pile. Reflexively, she clamps down, locking his leg between her thighs like she’d read about in Noguchi-sensei’s book. She swiftly follows this with a gable grip around his

knee, then she starts twisting Kakashi-sensei's heel to generate torque at the ankle. It's one of the simplest leg-locks, and a bread-and-butter move for a practitioner of any jujutsu discipline.

Not that she's *really* one of those, yet. But still.

Kakashi-sensei just blinks slowly at her. "What are you doing?"

Sakura grunts, trying to escalate the torque from his ankle to his knee by leaning sideways. "A heel hook. Is it working?"

"...No."

She deflates, but only briefly, before once again succumbing to impulse—a petty one, this time—and bites his leg.

That earns both a squawk and also Kakashi-sensei yanking the limb from her hold as quickly as possible without actually hurting her.

"You bit me!" he accuses (a little redundantly, in her opinion) before finally disentangling himself from the pile of toothy-genin and dog fur and backwards crab-walking a short but safe distance away.

Sakura just sticks her tongue out at him and wraps her arms around Bull and Urushi, cuddling them close. "The ninken bite me all the time," she drawls. "They taught me *greet with your teeth."*

Her teacher's glare immediately falls on the dogs. "This is *your* fault. And that's for enemies, I am your beloved teacher!"

Both canine warriors are deeply unimpressed. "You left her in our care," Urushi points out.

Sakura, overcome with the desire to antagonize, bares those aforementioned teeth at Kakashi-sensei the way that Akino showed her, eyes flashing. And then just to be a little shit, she completes the dominance display by lifting her chin, mockingly baring her neck while holding Kakashi-sensei's gaze defiantly.

Kakashi-sensei's eye twitches, and Sakura can *see* the way his jaw works beneath his mask—the mask that prevents him from truly returning the display like his instincts want him to. *Ha.* She's not the only one with ninken-bestowed impulses, here.

However, the genin only gets to gloat on this for another moment before sensei's hand flashes out and clamps around her ankle, dragging her across the floor. Sakura goes with at first a squeak and then a yelp when he locks *her* leg into the exact heel hook she had been attempting earlier.

He doesn't release her calf until she's slapped frantically at his hip several times, squealing, "I yield, I yield!"

Her teacher harrumphs, standing, and really his glower *might* be scary if his visible eye weren't glittering with affection. As it is, Sakura just grins at him, bad mood totally forgotten.

Because sure, making Kakashi-sensei proud is nice and all, but annoying him is fulfilling on a spiritual level that Sakura can't quite articulate just yet.

Sakura moves to follow him and get up, but Kakashi-sensei quickly scruffs the back of her haori and lifts, plopping her on her feet. "Go rest," he commands in a voice that brooks no argument, before his tone softens. "I'll wake you for second watch, okay? I promise."

He really does know me well. Sakura gives him a small smile before headbutting his shoulder gently. A peace-offering that he returns with a ruffling of her hair. "Thanks, sensei."

Despite her elevated mood, Sakura's sleep is fitful. However, when Kakashi-sensei gently shakes her awake, *two* eyes gleaming at her in the twilight, the horrors of the coming days do seem a little less insurmountable.

Sakura yawns for what feels like the dozenth time already, and it's barely past 10:00 in the morning.

Turns out, bridge-watch is pretty boring.

She hadn't slept well last night, and seated here in the warm sun… it's a decent recipe for a nap. Or it would be, if she wasn't randomly struck with bouts of intense anxiety over the fact that a murderer might want to return her earlier favor with interest.

Kakashi-sensei's presence helps. He had informed her this morning that she is not to leave his sight, barring extreme circumstances or a need for the lady's room. Right now, he's seated close enough that Sakura could reach over and poke him. So she does.

His eye slides over to her. "Yes?"

"When we get back to Konoha, you should challenge Gai-sensei to a spar," she tells him. "'Cuz of the eye thing, and all." Also because she's never seen Gai fight and suspects it will be both awe-inspiring and hilarious.

He nods slowly. "That's not a bad idea, actually," he says easily, surprising her a little. "I've sparred with Gai more than anybody, so he would be an accurate gauge for how much my stamina has increased."

Sakura grins. "Maybe we can do a teacher-student team challenge," she suggests. "You n' me versus Gai-sensei and Lee."

He hums. "If we do that, we'd need to include the ninken somehow," he muses. "You know how they get when they feel left out."

That startles a laugh out of Sakura. Boy, does she. Imagine eight sets of the world's most tragic puppy-eyes, all directed at you, accompanied by the most pathetic whimpering. It's a phenomenon that has swindled Sakura out of her lunch more than once.

“I’ll workshop it,” she chirps.

Their conversation halts when a construction worker stops in front of them. He’s a man about Tazuna’s age with a bushy mustache and brows that could put even Lee’s to shame. His arms are crossed and he’s eyeing Sakura critically, like he’s sizing her up.

Already on edge, Sakura finds her cheer curdling immediately under the scrutiny.

She straightens. “Can I help you?”

“Maybe,” he says. “Yer pretty runty so ya might do.”

Sakura’s eye twitches. *Runty?*

“One of my chippies dropped his jigger down between some dunnage,” he drawls, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at a looming stack of pallets packed with wood on the other side of the worksite. “But none of us are small ‘nuff to get in there ‘n grab it.”

It takes Sakura several long seconds of squinting to parse that, but eventually she gathers that a carpenter lost his jigsaw in the pallets of timber, and this man is requesting that she use her small stature to squeeze in and retrieve it. *Aha.* Haruno Sakura, codebreaker extraordinaire!

“Oh!” Sakura hops to her feet, eager for a chance to be useful (and also for just any stimulation at all). Then she remembers herself and the situation, and turns to give her sensei questioning look.

His expression is considering. Tazuna is currently very occupied on this side of the site, Naruto and Sasuke are stationed nearer to the opposite end, and someone needs to stay within grabbing distance of the bridgebuilder at all times. And unfortunately, a beam bridge under construction makes for a rather odd potential battlefield. It is (obviously) much longer than it is wide, with large, exposed areas broken up by clusters of heavy machinery (the deck and pier

assembly zones especially) not to mention the girders that gleam like steel spiderwebs overhead. It's like a jungle gym, except much more dangerous.

The possible target on Sakura's back, of course, complicates all of this even further.

"Go ahead," he eventually allows with a shrug. Then his visible eye narrows. "But make it quick."

Sakura salutes him (a little facetiously). "Yessir! I'll be right back!"

Famous last words.

The foreman—Tetsuo-san, she learns—leads her over to the stacks of pallets, climbing a few before he points down into a narrow space between two of them. He turns on a flashlight pulled from his toolbelt and she follows its illuminating gaze to see that indeed, there is a small, portable saw wedged between the beams of timber.

Sakura squats down to get a closer look. "Hmm," she hums, scratching her chin. "It's pretty far down there but I think I can reach it." The genin starts to unbend, eyes glued to the imperiled jigsaw as she calculates the best angle of approach.

However, before Sakura can fully straighten, something warm and heavy drapes across her back. The smell of sweat and the sensation of stubbly skin brushing against her ear register the weight as a person, unmistakably adult and male.

The fear that ignites in Sakura's brain is instantaneous, all-consuming, and entirely animal.

Please, no!

Sakura throws a vicious elbow into his gut but that man doesn't even wheeze, let alone retreat. The weight on her back only grows heavier, nearly causing her knees to buckle.

nononononoNO NO!

With a wordless shriek she throws herself backwards, thrashing wildly in hopes of bucking him off. This time, to Sakura's confusion, he doesn't resist and instead slides away from her soundlessly.

Chest heaving, Sakura whirls to find Tetsuo-san slumping to the ground, utterly limp.

Then she sees the blood.

Three senbon stick out of the back of his neck, the wounds bleeding sluggishly.

Dead.

He's dead.

No.

Sakura's stomach bottoms out with dread, and ice rapidly replaces the fire in her veins. *No, please no.* She stumbles backwards, shoulder blades slamming into the pallets as mist rolls in unnaturally fast, blotting out the terrain. *We were supposed to have one more day!*

But unfortunately for her and the rest of Team Seven, their date with the devil is starting a little early.

Sakura stares blankly at the corpse (sage that *word)* for a few seconds before a shred of her wits return to her. With a gasp she arms herself with a kunai and summons chakra to her ears and nose.

The immediate rush of smells and sound—blood, ozone, brine, the clashing of metal—tell her that the fight is already underway. She takes off for the source of the noise, scrambling straight over the machinery instead of detouring around it.

The scene she finds is chaotic.

On one end, several blurs that she assumes are Kakashi-sensei and Zabuza (and clones) are engaged in a battle that she can only make out the details of when she maximizes the amount of chakra into her eye tenketsu, and then on the other, there appears to be some sort of floating cage of mirrors that sparkle like diamonds. A jutsu, definitely. From the confines of the mirrors, a powerful energy pulses, sinister and red and boiling hot on Sakura's senses.

With deepening dread, she realizes that Naruto and Sasuke must be trapped in there somewhere.

But where is—

"Tazuna!" she barks, zeroing in on where the bridge-builder is cowering in the shadow of a skid loader. She needs to get to him, and probably get him the hell out of here. Sucking in a steadying breath through her nose, Sakura flickers as far as she can, which only ends up being about half of the way there.

"Shit," she curses, drawing more chakra to her shaky legs to speed the rest of the journey. She *might* be able to handle two flickers now but she can't risk blacking out in the middle of the battlefield, so this will have to do.

Sakura nearly makes it there when something in her (blessedly expanded, fuck) peripheral vision has her throwing herself into a forward roll to duck.

Kubikiribocho whistles above her head, taking a few strands of hair with it. Well, shit. The party came to her.

Zabuza growls and gives chase after she rides the momentum of the roll into a dash.

Finally, she reaches the skid loader. Fueled by chakra, adrenaline, and perhaps a little insanity, Sakura throws herself in front of the

trembling Tazuna and adopts a defensive stance.

Now the Demon of the Mist stalks toward her slowly, drawing the tip of his enormous sword along the ground. He moves like a predator, all coiled lethality and a strange gracefulness. It is then that she notices the unusually bulging muscles and pulsating veins snaking around the visible areas of his skin, the way his chakra beats against her senses like a drum. *Ah.* That would explain why he rallied a day early—they'd fucking juiced him with something.

Soldier pills? No, not standard ones anyway. This had to be something more powerful…which hopefully means it also has worse side effects.

Sakura doesn't have much longer to ponder on this, because Zabuza is lifting Kubikiribocho above his head with one arm. The other arm has—and Sakura *will* gloat over her correct hunch for days if she survives this—a short, wickedly curved knife attached rather crudely to the stump.

"You got real bite, brat," he acknowledges, voice like a blade rasping over whetstone. "I'll make it quick."

It's then that Sakura realizes he intends to bring his sword down and chop her clean in half.

Before she can blink the blade is falling, and Sakura moves on utterly primal instinct, bringing her hands up to protect her face.

Later, much later, Sakura will look back on this moment and laugh, because what happens next really is a little ridiculous.

Right before the sword can cleave her in two, Sakura's palms clap together on either side of it in a rather hysterical imitation of how she might give thanks for a meal. A sound almost like a thunderclap echoes over the bridge, followed by a shockwave that vibrates the air. Miraculously, the combination of Sakura's chakra sealing her

hands to the blade, and reinforcing her limbs allows her to stand her ground.

She does not bend.

The deadly edge of Kubikiribocho trembles just above her skull, mere inches away from ending her life.

Zabuza's eyes flash with disbelief, then rage, finally followed by something akin to alarm when he registers the hissing noise emanating from Sakura's hands.

That is, exploding seals she'd slapped down on either side of his sword.

She grins, fangs bared. *Greet with your teeth.*

With a roar he hurls the sword away, clearly not willing to lose another limb to the struggle. And Sakura—dumb, dumb Sakura—goes with it, because in the heat of the moment she forgot to unglue her hands from the steel. The torque of the throw has the genin gasping in pain, her shoulder joints taken to their absolute limit.

But that's hardly the most important thing at *hand,* so to speak. At the very last second, careening ass over teacups in the air, Sakura manages to release her hold and separate from the sword.

Bang!

One tag misfires and the other detonates dangerously close to her head, washing out her senses with searing pain and white noise. The blow stuns her. Sakura barely even registers hitting the ground, and isn't lucid enough to realize how lucky she is that Kubikiribocho doesn't claim her head when it lands beside her with a clatter.

It's a weird dichotomy, somehow being both hyperware of the blazing agony in her body and yet somehow removed, like she's hearing muffled voices from a room over. There's a high-pitched ringing in

her left ear, the one that was closest to the blast. Something warm and wet is running down her jaw and neck.

I can't die now.

Sustained by something beyond her comprehension, Sakura drags her hands beneath her and pushes, pushes, *pushes* until she's scrambling upright. However, the world tilts viciously and Sakura dry-heaves, falling back down to her hands and knees.

Her palm lands on something.

The handle of Zabuza's blade.

Sakura's fingers curl around it, suddenly seized by the conviction that she has one more thing to do before she can rest. A bleary glance around her treats her to the vision of Kakashi-sensei raining hell down on about four juiced-to-the-gills Zabuzas, including the one she was just tangling with.

She doesn't know where Tazuna is and can't be bothered to find out

Up we go. Sakura doesn't ignore the return of the nausea so much that she just lets the vomit drool out of her mouth, and then ignores that instead. Kubikiribocho comes with her. The hilt in her grip *hurts,* a thrum of burning against her palms like it's trying to reject her. It probably is, the fucker.

Muscle memory from hours and hours of fetch with the ninken serves Sakura well, and generously. *Raise arms, step forward, begin to swing arms, follow through with the hips, and—*

Chakra floods her body, tip to toe.

Release!

With a mighty heave, Sakura hurls Kubikiribocho as hard as she can. The handle rips away from her palms like it's trying to escape her grasp, and Sakura is pretty sure it actually takes some of her skin

with it. Much like its botanical predecessors, the sword sings through the sky in a furious arc, whirling so fast that blade and hilt become one continuous ouroboros of steel. The path it cuts is vicious and fast, and it misses Zabuza by a mile.

That's fine. She wasn't aiming for him anyway.

The shattering of—glass? Ice? Who knows—cuts through the blast of white noise in Sakura's ears and brings a smile to her face. The shrapnel from the shattered cage of mirrors glitters like thousands of tiny diamonds, nearly blinding Sakura with their brilliance.

Maybe, just maybe, she was able to help her boys.

Completely spent, Sakura drops to one knee…before forcing herself to stand once more. Every muscle in her body protests, and her vision swims, but she begins to stagger her way back to Tazuna. Sakura keeps her bleary focus on the mist-nin, who for some reason has stopped moving and is eyeing her strangely.

His clones have also halted, now in a bizarre standoff with Kakashi-sensei.

"Why not aim for me?" he asks, head tilting to one side. "You're supposed to be protecting the bridge-builder, aren't you?"

Sakura can barely hear the questions because her whole world is muffled by white noise and high-pitched whine. Distantly, she recognizes that she probably has permanent hearing damage. *Lovely.* She treks on anyway.

Finally, she reaches Tazuna, and plants herself in front of him once more. "I won't," she gasps, trying to quell the dizziness and nausea by circulating some chakra to her damaged ear. Blessedly, it works. "I won't let you hurt my precious people."

Vertigo temporarily abated, Sakura's mind clears. Her focus sharpens in on Zabuza and she shifts into a stance that's marginally

less precarious and decently more aggressive.

She watches him watch her for a few seconds, before something odd happens. Zabuza, his three clones, and Kakashi-sensei all stiffen and then perk up, like dogs hearing the tell-tale scrabble of a small woodland creature outside a window. Sakura would recognize it, she's seen the ninken go after plenty of squirrels.

Later on, the memory of their heads all swiveling in perfect unison will be amusing, but right now it's just alarming.

Then, apropos of nothing, Zabuza's clones disperse and he bellows, *"Haku!"*

Sakura is deeply confused until she hears someone distantly respond, "Yes, Zabuza-sama?"

She turns to see the hunter-nin *also* in a stand-off with Naruto who is standing guard over Sasuke-kun. Alarmingly, he appears to be out cold at Naruto's feet.

"Change of plans," the missing-nin calls to his companion. "We're getting the fuck outta here."

Sakura gapes, stunned at the turn of events. "What—"

Then, the distant rumble of thunder.

No, not thunder…

Now Sakura also turns in the same direction as her teacher and Zabuza had, and gasps.

Not thunder.

Men.

Hundreds of them, armed to the teeth with weapons of all kinds, and these aren't the scrawny, raggedy villagers, either.

Oh, shit. Sakura realizes with a bolt of dread that these are likely Gato's men, sent in to clean up whatever Zabuza couldn't handle. Or perhaps in this case, didn't want to handle.

The sea of men shores up, completely filling the expanse of the bridge. Then it splits, revealing a short, wide man dressed in much finer clothes and who is distinctly sans weapon, unless you count his dangerously ugly haircut.

"Gato," she, Kakashi-sensei, Zabuza, and Tazuna all growl in unison.

The crime lord approaches, a swagger in his walk. He clearly feels like he has the upper-hand, here.

"Zabuza," Gato drawls. "What's all this? I give you resources, weapons, the finest chakra-enhancers money can buy…and here you are, struggling to kill three brats and their doddering sensei?"

Sakura can hear sensei mutter, *"Doddering?"* which would be hilarious if not for their imminent, ya know. *Demise.*

The short man continues, waving a cane that appears to be encrusted with diamonds. "One might even begin to suspect you were trying to shortchange me on our deal."

The crowd behind Gato makes dissatisfied noises at that, rattling their weapons and stomping their feet.

Sakura, for one, is struck dumb by the theatricality of it all. Is this what S-rank fights are always like? Show-boating, dramatic pauses, surprise-villain enter from stage right, cue the long-winded exposition? She figured the higher-level the fight, the shorter and more brutal it would be. Seriously, why has no one used this weird pause to start stabbing?? Is she crazy?!

"I'm a man of honor, you know," Gato says, tap-tap-tapping his cane on the ground. "I can't simply let a transgression like this pass. Perhaps I should have my men here take care of the lot of you."

And, *oh.* Sakura gets it now. Gato didn't bring his cabal of henchmen here to be backup for Zabuza, he brought them here so they can take advantage of the mist-nin's (and ostensibly, her team's) weakened state and *kill them all.* Gato doesn't have to pay Zabuza, he gets to collect the bounties of an S-rank missing nin and an S-rank Konoha nin, and Tazuna ends up dead either way. It's win-win-win, and if Sakura divests herself entirely of her morals, not a bad plan.

Kakashi-sensei and Zabuza share a long, loaded look. Then, they both shift—perhaps to throw the other to the proverbial wolves, first?

No, not that, she realizes. They move to stand shoulder to shoulder, squaring up against the crowd of hundreds.

Sakura blinks, and scrubs at her eyes. It doesn't really help her blurry vision, nor does it change what she's seeing.

Kakashi-sensei and Zabuza are teaming up.

There's a beat, and then Zabuza growls, "Gato's mine."

Kakashi-sensei shrugs, and it's at this moment that Gato's cocky expression begins to morph instead into one of someone who is realizing they may have miscalculated, and badly.

They disappear in blurs of blue and gray. After that, it is nothing but violence.

While her teacher and his adversary-turned-ally begin to cut Gato's men down like they're pesky weeds instead of hardened criminals, Sakura turns her focus onto her other teammates.

"Come with me," she orders Tazuna, already beginning to stagger towards the boys. Thankfully, it's the opposite direction of the massacre occurring at this moment.

Sakura's journey is slow and in fits and starts, but eventually she makes it to Naruto and Sasuke-kun. The former is kneeling with the latter's head in his lap, arms looped protectively around his shoulders. It would be an endearing scene, if Zabuza's companion weren't busily removing senbon from Sasuke-kun's body like he's a pin-cushion and they're a tailor on a deadline.

He's not breathing.

The dread and fury that cuts through Sakura's mind is unlike anything she's ever experienced before. Is Sasuke…? No, he can't be.

No. *No.*

Sakura is going for her weapons pouch, fully intending to carve out the heart of this pretty-boy mist-fucker and *eat it* when Sasuke suddenly takes a deep, shuddering breath.

"Sasuke-kun!" she cries in unison with Naruto, falling to her knees beside him. "You're alive!"

The not-dead boy in question groans, a grimace pinching his elegant features. The hunter-nin must have incapacitated him the same way they'd done to Zabuza a few days ago, inducing a terrifying state of mimicked death. Sakura desperately wants to throw herself onto Sasuke-kun and hug him, but barely manages to refrain out of fear of exacerbating his injuries. Also, she might pass out on top of him, which would *not* be cute.

Naruto brushes a few strands of hair from Sasuke's sweaty forehead with a surprising gentleness, his face troubled. Then, in a tone more hostile than she's ever heard it, asks, "Why didn't you kill him?"

The hunter-nin sits back, having retrieved the last of the senbon from Sasuke's flesh. "I take no pleasure in killing," they murmur. "Believe it or not, neither does Zabuza-sama."

Narurto *pffts* at that, and Sakura can't help but agree. "For someone who doesn't like killing, he sure does like to talk about entrails n' stuff," the blond points out.

Haku shrugs so slightly Sakura can scarcely claim she witnessed it. "The life of a missing-nin is harsh, and not all weapons are made of steel," they murmur cryptically.

Naruto makes a miffed noise but Sakura's brain is *whirring* as it calculates the depths of that sentence. "Oh," her head tilts to the side, putting a few things together. "If you cultivate the right kind of reputation, people will leave you alone. *Fear* is a weapon, too."

Haku's eyes land on her, but Sakura pays no mind as she thinks out loud. "On the other hand, the stronger you appear, the higher caliber of enemies you'll attract. Not to mention the crazies who like to kill for sport. You'd really have to work on striking a balance."

"You're very perceptive," Haku comments, shifting to tug their torn haori to cover up more of their chest. It's then that Sakura notices the hunter-nin's injuries, which appear to be a set of four long, jagged gashes running across their chest…like they'd been slashed by some huge, clawed monster. *Weird,* because there haven't been any of those on the bridge yet, as far as Sakura can tell.

"Sakura-chan is *way* smart," Naruto chirps as Sakura stares a little creepily at Haku's upper-body.

They adjust the tattered fabric again, and Sakura makes a decision. She doesn't know what gender this Haku person identifies as, but it seems like they're made uncomfortable by the exposed skin regardless.

Like a true gentleman, Sakura unbuckles her belt and shucks off her haori, handing it over to the hunter-nin. Thankfully, she'd worn a black mesh tank-top along with her usual sports bra today, so she just feels a little chilly rather than totally exposed.

Haku blinks, a look of genuine shock flitting over their features before they reach out to accept the proffered garment.

“Wait!” Naruto barks. “Let me!” He then awkwardly begins to wrestle off his jacket while simultaneously trying not to dump Sasuke’s body on the ground.

Sakura rolls her eyes. “It’s fine, Naruto. Here, Haku-san, take it.” She offers the haori again.

But Naruto persists. “No, wait!” He finally manages to get the jacket off. “...It was kinda my fault anyway.”

That stops Sakura short. The slashes are *Naruto’s* fault? Does it have something to do with the weird red chakra she’d seen earlier in the mirror cage? *Definitely something to follow up on.*

There’s a brief back and forth but ultimately, Haku ends up wearing Naruto’s jacket while Sakura pulls her haori back on. Sasuke-kun’s head is safely returned to Naruto’s lap, which Sakura should probably be jealous about but that's a problem for when there's less mass-murder happening nearby. It’s right at the end of this game of musical shirts that Kakashi-sensei and Zabuza approach, apparently having dispatched with all of Gato’s henchmen, and the crime-lord himself.

Sakura can’t help but marvel a little. The fight (if one could even call it that) clearly didn’t last long. Gato’s men must have numbered over a hundred, but they were no match for a well-rested Kakashi-sensei and doped-up Demon of the Mist, who both seem to be sporting little more than scratches and bruises.

She leans to peer around Kakashi-sensei’s nearing form, taking in the piles of bodies and the steam that rises from them. It’s a victory, technically, but she quickly averts her eyes from the grim scene regardless.

Haku has already jumped to their feet, rushing to support a progressively slumping Zabuza who is very obviously coming down from whatever chakra-enhancers they gave him. The missing-nin makes a disgusted face at the orange fabric currently gracing his companion's shoulders, and Sakura realizes with a jolt that his face is totally normal—even handsome, if you prefer the scruffy caveman type—save for some very sharp teeth. *Huh.*

"Zabuza-sama, let us withdraw," they say, slipping under Zabuza's arm to act as his crutch.

"Not withdrawin'," the missing-nin protests, words beginning to slur. He points a wobbly finger at sensei. "Still gotta chop up this leaf-fucker's ass."

Sakura's gaze flickers nervously over to Kakashi-sensei at that, but he doesn't seem bothered in the slightest. It might have something to do with the fact that Zabuza is almost falling over and her teacher looks like he's barely getting warmed up.

Haku just smiles fondly. "Of course, Zabuza-sama," and then begins to lead him away.

Sakura watches them go, once again struck by the absurdity of it all.

However, before they get too far, Zabuza stops and shakes Haku off. Then he turns, pulling something out of his pocket and tossing it at Sakura. Thankfully, even in his state the missing-nin's aim is excellent, and she doesn't have to move much to catch it. She's not sure if she would have made it without face-planting, to be honest.

Sakura uncurls her fist, investigating the gift while Naruto whines that *it's not fair she's the only one who gets a present!*

But Sakura is paying him no mind, too curious about the item. It appears to be a strange scale, a deep, matte grey-blue, almost tooth-like in its thickness and sharp edges, attached to a thin chain.

A necklace. She turns it over in her fingers and demands, “What is it?”

Zabuza just gives her a nasty grin. “A last resort.”

Sakura frowns. “Huh?”

“Figure it out, brat.” And then he and Haku vanish in a swirl of mist.

Sakura just stares at the spot where they used to be until a familiar hand drops down onto her shoulder.

“May I see that, Sakura-chan?” Kakashi-sensei asks, crouching down next to where she kneels.

The genin blinks. “Sure.” She hands it over.

Kakashi-sensei examines the necklace, turning it this way and that, even bringing it up to his mask to sniff. His eyes narrow contemplatively, but otherwise he doesn’t react. “Hm.”

Sakura watches greedily, hoping for *some* indication of its properties. “What is it?”

“Hm. Here.” He drops it into her hands and straightens.

“Sensei—” she starts, but Sakura’s next words are cut off by a dry-heave. The vertigo-induced nausea, back with a vengeance.

She whimpers. It’s somehow worse that the feeling comes and goes without warning. One second she’s fine, the next she’s ready to puke and then fall face-first into it. *Gross.*

Kakashi-sensei reaches out to steady her, a sympathetic grimace crinkling his eyes. “You might have a ruptured eardrum,” he says, confirming Sakura’s suspicions. “They usually heal fine on their own, but they’re not fun in the meantime.”

Sakura just whines wordlessly in response, clutching at her hair. Now that the adrenaline is fading, her head fucking *hurts.* It's like someone is beating the inside of her skull with a hammer.

Suddenly, a man-shaped shadow is being cast over Sasuke and she looks up.

"Oi, can you help us move these assholes off the bridge?" Tazuna has materialized next to them, already having re-donned his hardhat and toolbelt. Sakura can admire that kind of diligence.

"We can't work around this much…stuff." He grimaces on the last word.

Kakashi-sensei looks to him with a bland eye-smile. "Sure," he agrees, before turning back to his genin.

"Stay here," he says, and drops a hand on both Sakura and Naruto's heads. "I'll be back shortly. Sasuke-kun, keep these two troublemakers in line for me, okay?"

Sasuke just groans.

Their teacher then summons his ninken and makes several shadow clones before strolling after Tazuna. Sakura and Naruto watch him go, not saying a word.

After a few moments of silence, Naruto sighs gustily. "What a day, huh?" he says, patting Sasuke commiseratingly on the chest.

There's another beat, and then Sakura laughs hard enough that she almost vomits.

"Yeah," she eventually agrees, wiping mirthful (and vertigo-ful) tears from her eyes. "What a day."

ohoho, and we see the end of the wave arc! originally i was gonna end this with sakura blacking out after she throws the sword...betcha you're glad i didn't :3 i know i am! this chapter feels much more rounded out with the continued action, IMO.

i hope you enjoyed, and let me know what you think. seriously, everyone's kind comments fueled me to crank this one out. you guys are amazing!!!

next time: team 7 is safe and sound back in konoha!.....or are they? :3c

No takesie-backsies

Chapter 9: No takesie-backsies

Hello all of you lovely, wonderful people! The response to the last chapter has been incredible--so many sweet comments!! I love reading your theories and predictions, and it's so interesting to see which parts different people enjoyed the most.

Also, a quick plug: I published another Sakura-centric story, called "still waters"! It's a long (25k) oneshot that follows Sakura in an AU where another war with Iwa broke out when she's a kid. Also, no Uchiha massacre. It's a dark story and quite violent, so a bit of a departure from the tone of RRD, but I am proud of it. Please do heed the warnings (and there's an author's note at the end of the fic with specific, spoiler-containing warnings if you need that) but otherwise enjoy. Check it out here!

now, a **CONTENT WARNING for this chapter: NEEDLES.** Fairly graphic description of a needle being used, starts with the line that says "During Sasuke's session" and ends about eight paragraph breaks later. also, some pretty Naruto-standard interrogation stuff happens later in the chapter, but nothing too heinous.

Enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Team Seven remains in Wave for another week while the bridge is finished, and Naruto’s jacket, washed and folded, appears one morning on Tsunami-san’s porch. Without Gato’s interference, the pace of construction picks up significantly. Sakura is constantly awed by just how much *more* bridge there is every time she walks out to its furthest point. It’s truly a marvel of engineering and effort.

The time also gives Sakura and Sasuke a chance to recover a bit before attempting any travel, though their healing journeys are aided along when reinforcements from Konoha show up to help patrol the bridge and prevent any would-be Gato Corp usurpers. Along with them is a middle-aged female medic, who takes one look at Team Seven's (well, Sasuke and Sakura's) haggard appearances and all but jumps them, hands ablaze with Mystic Palm.

Sasuke's wounds are thankfully small, but puncture wounds are extremely high risk for infection. And despite the existence of techniques that can call down lightning or create earthquakes, a shinobi's only defense against that is good ol' antibiotics.

During Sasuke's session, Sakura watches with fascinated horror as the medic-nin wields a rather medieval-looking syringe and systematically injects saline into each of Sasuke's wounded joints (his left knee and right elbow) before aspirating it back out.

"This is called a joint check or saline load test," the medic-nin says, correctly interpreting Sakura's wide eyes as interest rather than true horror. "This helps me determine the trajectory of the puncture wounds and more importantly, if they have compromised the joint space."

Sakura watches as the medic expertly inserts the needle into the side of Sasuke's knee, swallowing heavily as she wiggles it slightly to ensure correct positioning. Sasuke is, blessedly, unconscious from an anesthetic jutsu and is unaware of the goings-on.

"I will inject saline into the joint space until the capsule distends and fluid leaks out of either my entry point or the puncture site. Leaking from the senbon wound is a positive test and indicates a traumatic arthrotomy, which means I'll need to really load your pal up with antibiotics before I heal him."

"Does Mystic Palm not heal infection?" Sakura asks, eyes trained on the careful movements of the medic. Nearly two-hundred CCs of

saline disappear into Sasuke's knee, and she's relieved to see that it only oozes from around the needle and nowhere else.

"It does not," the medic responds, now beginning to reverse the plunger on the syringe. The saline returning to the barrel is tinged pink, nearly the color of Sakura's hair. It's pretty, in a revolting sort of way.

"In fact, if I just healed him without doing a test like this, there's a chance I could seal the bacteria in the joint space. It could destroy his knee, or at worst cause sepsis and kill him."

Sakura swallows again, now watching as the medic repeats the procedure with a fresh needle and saline, this time injecting Sasuke's elbow joint. "Joints don't get a lot of blood-flow, right?" Sakura says. "Is that why they're so vulnerable to infection?"

The medic flashes her the briefest of pleased looks before her attention returns to the task at hand. "Correct," she replies. "And I hardly imagine this is a surprise, but shinobi are terrible patients. They all seem to be allergic to bed-rest."

Sakura giggles. Ain't *that* the truth. The ninken have regaled her of many a story of Kakashi-sensei committing all sorts of acts of absurdity to escape the clutches of medical professionals.

"It looks like your friend's joint spaces are unviolated, so I'll just give him an oral regimen of antibiotics," the medic declares. "Now, let's get him bandaged up and take a look at you, girlie."

Sakura's evaluation is both better and worse. Better because she doesn't need to be stabbed with giant needles. Worse because even after several long minutes of healing her ear, there's still a displeased twist to the medic's mouth.

"How…how bad is it?" Sakura asks, fearing the worst. She's been aware of her depleted hearing in her left ear—of course she has—but has been counting on it coming back after recovering.

“The perforation in your eardrum healed just fine, and you don’t seem to have received significant head trauma,” the medic begins, sitting back on her heels. “So your vertigo shouldn’t return. Are you familiar with how hearing works?”

Sakura bites her lip. “There’s like…teeny little hairs, right? Cillia, I think they’re called. In the inner ear. And sound is just air vibrating at different frequencies. The cilia convert the vibrations into…electrical signals? For your nerves.”

The medic nods, that same pleased expression returning to her face. “Correct again. Those nerves transmit the signals to your brain, which is then interpreted as *sound.* Now, unfortunately, cilia are quite delicate. Loud noises—like an exploding tag going off close to your head—can damage the hairs and eventually cause them to die. And they can’t grow back.”

Sakura sighs. “I don’t suppose you brilliant medics have invented a way to regenerate them?”

The medic chuckles. “Unfortunately, regenerating sensory cells is very tricky. It’s easy to get wired crossed.”

Sakura imagines what it would be like if the now very faint ringing in her ear was much louder and grimaces. “Yeah, understood.”

“Hearing loss is generally categorized as mild, moderate, severe, or profound. I would rate the loss in your left ear somewhere between moderate and severe, conservatively leaning towards severe..”

Sakura’s stomach bottoms out. *Severe hearing loss.* “Can I…do I have to stop being a shinobi?”

The medic barks out a startled laugh. “Oh, heavens no! If that was enough to get you discharged, we’d be plum out of shinobi. There’s a chance that more of it will return, and you have a fully healthy ear on the other side.” The medic’s grin becomes mischievous. “Besides,

you strike me as a clever brat. I'm sure you can figure something out."

Sakura hums, already envisioning transforming her chakra into thousands of tiny tendrils, to take up the mantle left by the dead cilia. It's probably not something she can do all of the time, but during combat perhaps? She *also* envisions being able to completely ignore Naruto's more obnoxious chattering (it ebbs and flows) by simply keeping to his right.

It's important to look at the positive side of things.

"I'm actually fully deaf in my right ear," the medic continues, startling Sakura. "Bad ear infection when I was a brat. I can teach you some FSL, if you'd like."

Sakura blinks. "FSL?"

The medic's eyes flick up to her as she begins to pack away her supplies. "Fire Sign Language. It's the most widely spoken sign language in the country, though there are regional dialects and whatnot of course."

The genin is silent, stunned. She's never once considered learning another language–effectively all of the shinobi nations speak Japanese, so there isn't really a reason to. She wouldn't even know where to begin. For some reason, the prospect of learning an entirely new language is thrilling.

"Do other countries have different sign languages?" Sakura asks. "Even though we all mostly speak Japanese?"

The medic nods. "Sure do. Sometimes they're offshoots of shinobi hand-signaling and sometimes they've been created from the ground-up by the local deaf community. FSL and Konoha shinobi hand-signals have some overlap but it's minor. Of course, special-ops have their own system."

Sakura's eyes go wide and she scoots closer. "Teach me."

The medic laughs. "Alright, let's start simple. This is how you sign *please…"*

And that's how Sakura spends the next several days following the medic (who she eventually learns is named Kondo-san) around like a little duckling and learning the basics of FSL, as well as picking up some first-aid and anatomy knowledge. She also fiddles constantly with the gift from Zabuza, but to no rewarding end, and ends up just wearing it as a necklace tucked safely beneath her haori. A mystery to be solved later, if ever.

When Team Seven is finally ready to depart, Sakura is disappointed to learn that the other Konoha shinobi will be remaining behind—for a few reasons.

'Hey sensei,' she signs a little clumsily to her teacher as Naruto and Sasuke make a competition out of packing their bags, ' *I'm pretty sure Wave wants to be a sovereign state, not a colony of Konoha.'* She flickers her gaze to the house across the street from Tsunami-san's that has become the de facto base of operations for the incoming and ever-growing Konoha presence.

He eyes her for a moment and then shrugs. *'Unfortunately, that isn't up to us,'* he signs back with perfect grammar and clean hand motions.

Kakashi-sensei had spent one evening a few days ago chatting with Kondo-san with his sharingan activated and was instantly fluent. This was grating to Sakura (who is remarkably conversable according to Kondo-san, but still) until she realized that he can continue to teach and practice with her after they've left. *Hell yeah!*

Once the journey back to Konoha begins, Naruto and Sasuke, predictably, take great offense to being left out of *anything* and demand to be taught FSL as well.

It goes about as well as one could expect, because Sasuke instantly cheats with the sharingan and Naruto overcompensates by practicing obsessively, pestering Sakura to the point that she develops a habit of sticking a finger in her hearing ear and closing her eyes to ignore him.

Kakashi-sensei also has them practice formations with her left ear taken into account, though her training with chakra-cilia is going well. Forming the little hairs isn't too difficult, but keeping them in place and functioning while multitasking (eg, walking, or eventually fighting) is a little tricky. Meditation and practice will be the key to mastering this skill, she knows.

It seems odd to her, though. If she can make these little chakra cilia, why can't medics regenerate them? Is the issue the junction between the cilia and her nerves? Is it difficult to enervate properly? Or maybe there are just some things you *can't* regenerate?

Sakura voices these thoughts to Kondo-san fairly absently because at the time she is so focused on applying some ointment to the ripped calluses of a bridge-worker, so she doesn't see the strange look the medic gives her. Nor does she see Kondo-san pull Kakashi-sensei over later and whisper things to him, and the subsequent strange look her teacher gives Sakura, too.

Adjusting to the sudden change in her hearing is…more weird than it is hard. She doesn't feel comfortable sleeping on her right side anymore. She'll turn her head and be startled by the addition of some higher-pitch noise: birdsong or the chatter of distant conversation. Lower-pitch sounds register more equally in both ears, so male voices are easier to parse—except Naruto's of course. The blond actually proves to be incredibly considerate of her new disability, waiting until she cocks her right ear at him to continue speaking and using signs when he can. Begrudgingly, her fondness for him grows.

To be fair, Sasuke *is* similarly considerate, but he speaks to her rarely enough and in a scant enough quantity of words that the

difference is nearly imperceptible. However, he seems to appreciate being able to convey simple sentiments without speaking, and Sakura finds herself on the receiving end of many signed *thank yous,* which when she thinks about it is a genuine improvement of his civility.

Weird.

By the time that Team Seven arrives back in Konoha, having taken the journey at a rather leisurely pace, the boys squabble with both loud voices and fierce (if a little clumsy) gesticulation, while Sakura and her teacher amble behind them with long-suffering shared glances and exasperated signs. Kakashi-sensei walks with both eyes uncovered, and has developed a penchant for winking as he was apparently denied the gesture for so long.

Sakura's team is a little odd to be sure, but she wouldn't have it any other way.

Once safely ensconced in the city walls, the three genin go their separate ways with a Kakashi-clone in tow while the original departs for the hokage's office to give the official mission report. It is just after dusk, and while perhaps not late enough to warrant bedtime on a typical day, right now all Sakura can think of is her fluffy pillows and warm duvet.

"Get some rest," he orders. "We'll reconvene tomorrow at the bridge. Ta!" He vanishes with a wink and a flurry of leaves.

The clone accompanying Sakura to her family home disperses in a similar fashion, though he takes a moment to scruff her haori and give her a gentle shake before ruffling her hair.

"Play-time is at seven, as usual," he informs her. "The ninken are excited, so don't be late." Then he's gone.

Sakura lets herself into the house, which is dark and quiet and precisely how she left it a couple weeks ago. A glance at the

calendar tells her that her parents are due back in a couple of days, which lifts her spirits. *It'll be nice to spend some time with them,* she thinks.

The shower Sakura takes is long and hot, and she selects her comfiest pajamas before crawling into her bed. The plush softness feels a little foreign at first, since she's been snoozing on bedrolls and spare futons for the better part of a month. However, it only takes a few minutes to recalibrate and for her eyes to grow heavy and fall shut.

She dreams of a white mask and screams.

Sakura's eyes blink open.

Everything is bright. Painfully so. The light is white and bleaching, the glare of fluorescents instead of the gentle sun.

What…?

Her perception of other sensations trickles in. There is a biting cold under her thighs, and her bare toes just barely scuff the ground. A chair, she's sitting in a chair. A metal one.

The panic thrums in her mind but it feels dull and muffled. Has she been drugged? What's happening? Is this a genjutsu?

Have I been kidnapped?

She blinks. There is another chair across from her, and her favorite stuffed toy–a pug that reminds her of Pakkun-sensei–is still clutched in her arms. Its softness and familiarity is the only thing keeping her from sobbing.

Sakura tries to get up but can't, her legs won't move, what is happening? *What is happening?*

A shiver wracks her body. She's still in her oversized shirt, with thin sleep shorts that provide little barrier between her and the chilly steel beneath her legs. She feels horrible. *Vulnerable.* What's going to happen?

Is someone going to hurt me?

The sound of a door opening is like thunder crashing. *Click of the lock, twist of the knob.* The squeak of hinges is the shriek of a beast. Each footstep is an earthquake in her chest.

Sakura's heart is beating so fast she might vomit.

Her left ear is nothing but ringing, the clanging of a warning bell and she can't focus on anything other than the fact that she might be about to die, or worse.

Please, no.

Please.

"Sakura-chan, hello."

The earth falls out from under her and Sakura blinks. Her mouth drops open. She would know that platinum blond hair and those cornflower blue eyes anywhere.

Yamanaka Inoichi, Ino's father, lowers himself carefully into the chair across from her.

"It's been a while," he greets lightly, like they're running into each other in the dairy aisle of the supermarket and not like she's been *freaking kidnapped.*

Sakura remains silent and the slightest of grimaces darkens his face. "I'm sorry our reunion is under these circumstances. Due to the nature of your last mission, the hokage just wants me to make sure there aren't any…discrepancies."

Sakura’s panic abruptly transforms into an icy rage. She wants to thrash in her chair but her body remains frozen. “Where are Naruto and Sasuke-kun? Where is Kakashi-sensei?!”

Inoichi’s expression doesn’t change. “We’re not here to talk about them. Do you remember how I told you once that I can use my chakra to walk in people’s dreams?”

The abrupt, incongruous query startles Sakura out of her fury, if just for a moment. She does remember that, from sleepovers with Ino. he would promise them that if they had nightmares he would arrive in their dreams like a knight in shining armor, and defeat any evil. It did help her sleep better, back then.

A little ironic, given the current circumstances.

He waits for her answer, and without the ability to do much else, she just numbles, “Yes.”

“Well, that’s sort of what I’ll be doing now. We’re just going to take a walk through your memories of the mission, okay?”

Sakura swallows, thankful her body can at least do that. “What will it be like for me?”

His smile is wan. “It will be like a dream. Nothing too scary, I promise.”

Sakura’s heartbeat is rabbit-quick and she realizes that she’s trembling and cannot stop. “...will you let me go home afterwards?”

“I think that can be arranged.”

What a perfect non-answer. Sakura would roll her eyes, but whatever this body-freezing technique is doesn’t permit it. “Okay,” she agrees, because what else can she do?

His hands raise and assume the seal she’s seen a hundred times, courtesy of Ino. “Then I shall begin. Deep breath, Sakura-chan.”

Everything is dark.

And then everything is light again, though not the austere and blinding fluorescents of whatever room she'd just been in.

No, Sakura is in her bedroom, standing before a pile of clothes and gear strewn over her duvet. Her backpack is in her arms, and that's right—she's trying to figure out how much to pack for a two-week mission in Wave.

It's like the most intense deja-vu Sakura has ever experienced. Her body moves without her consent and yet she knows that every move she makes is exactly what she would want to do anyway. The days bleed together, moments shrinking and stretching before her very eyes and in her brain.

Tazuna. The Demon Brothers. The terror of seeing Kakashi-sensei trapped by Zabuza. The heartbreak of Kaiza's story. The triumph of stealing Kubikiribocho and the massive cognitive readjustment of losing her hearing.

Somehow it only takes minutes and yet feels like hours, or days. It's exhausting and horrible and then suddenly she's sitting in a chair again, shaking like a leaf and clutching the stuffed pug like it's a lifeline.

"Do you know what happened to the item that Zabuza gave you?"

It takes several seconds for Sakura to parse that question, and then her hand flies reflexively to her throat, freed from the paralysis at last–but the necklace is nowhere to be found. Come to think of it, she hadn't been wearing it when she showered, had she? *Where did it…?*

Abruptly, she panics. "I don't know, I can't remember," she says, toes curling with anxiety. "The last time I saw it—"

“Relax, Sakura-chan,” Inoichi raises his hands soothingly, like one might do at a wounded and terrified animal. “I think your sensei snatched it when he saw you to your house. We can retrieve it from him later.”

Sakura blinks. *When did he—wait.* He scruffed her haori like he’d been so fond of doing lately, and probably thieved it then. The petty trickery would have amused Sakura in any other situation, but all she can feel right now is anxiety.

Suddenly, everything wavers, and in a blink Sakura is sitting in a regular wooden chair in what looks like a drab office space.

What the hell?

Inoichi smiles that tepid smile at her. “Trick of the trade. The seals in this room make it appear to you as a setting that would be extremely *mildly* uncomfortable. In some situations, minor but persistent discomfort can actually be much more efficient at breaking down mental defences than unchecked terror, especially if you need clear recollection.”

Sakura just stares at him, wishing he hadn’t shared that information with her. Great, she got her first lesson in torture and interrogation, and it was *first-hand.*

“Can I go home now?” she asks. The wooden chair is more comfortable than the steel, but suddenly her lack of clothing and gear is all the more stark. She practically feels *naked.* It’s as humiliating as it is terrifying.

Inoichi frowns sympathetically. “I think the hokage would like to speak with you first, and then, yes, you can go home.”

The door opens again, and this time Sakura’s body allows her to turn. A person in a cat-like mask appears, presumably to whisk her off somewhere. The mask is the same one she saw in her dream, she realizes. *Perhaps not a dream after all.*

Sakura tries to quell her fear and mostly fails when the special-ops agent wraps surprisingly gentle arms around her. They even allow her a moment to readjust to get more comfortable.

In another blink and brief bout of head-spinning nausea, Sakura finds herself standing before the hokage's desk. Her knees tremble something terrible, and she kind of misses that chair, now.

The hokage is silent as Sakura adjusts to her new surroundings.

Sunlight filters in through the windows, warming her slightly. Sakura is shocked to realize that it is already mid-morning. *Just how long did the mind-walk take?*

Sakura turns her attention to the man in front of her. What's happening? What's *going* to happen? Does Kakashi-sensei know that all of this is happening? Is this where they kill her and posthumously accuse her of treason? No, the mask-guy would've done it then, she's far too small a fry for the hokage to be the executioner, right? Right.

…right?

"Haruno-kun, thank you for joining me," he cuts her increasingly panicked thoughts off. The sandaime steeples his fingers, pipe bobbing where it is trapped between his pursed, wrinkly lips. "I wanted to personally explain why we chose to do this."

Sakura is silent, eyeing him warily, and he continues. "During this mission, you not only successfully incapacitated an S-ranked missing-nin, but also treated the chronic injury of one of our most powerful shinobi. You also have allegedly pioneered some sort of deafness-curing technique. Your file as it is would never indicate the possibility of such achievements, especially in such quick succession."

Oh. So that's what it is.

They think she's a spy. Because she sucked so hard before and now sucks marginally less.

Great.

"Furthermore, you were given a currently unaccounted for gift by said missing-nin before you returned. As I'm sure you can sympathize, this occurred to us as being a little…odd."

The genin nods slowly, even though what she really wants to do is flip him the double bird, and also clarify that her technique doesn't *cure* deafness, it just serves as a temporary aid, so to speak.

"It is in the best interest of the village to pursue such problematic contingencies without hesitation, which is why we brought you in to be questioned in such a matter. As it were, we discovered no such indiscretion. You have been and remain a loyal shinobi of Konoha."

He dips his head, as if in deference. "I apologize for the disturbance, and I thank you for your continued service to—"

Then he stops, chin lifting and eyes flicking to the door behind her.

Sakura strains but can't hear anything, even with her good ear. She doesn't want to move, or to take her eyes off of the hokage *because what if this is a ruse,* some weird charade to get her to lash out. She can't use any chakra, terrified it will register as a threat and get her killed.

Finally, Sakura picks up on some quiet thumps, then the rattle of the door handle. It must be locked because it remains closed. There's a beat, and then whoever is behind the door kicks it open.

Sakura flinches like she's been struck, eyes frozen on her bare feet.

Then, a growl. "Sakura."

She whirls, recognizing the voice immediately. "Sensei!" she cries, knees going weak with relief.

And indeed, there stands Kakashi-sensei, shoulders tense and eyes glinting. He's dressed in civvies, black joggers and a hoodie, and any other time this would be a treat beyond comprehension—*sensei, in civilian clothes! And he looks kinda cool!*—as it is, Sakura just stands there and stares, lip wobbling as the tears gather in her eyes.

His eyes scan over Sakura, taking in her state of undress, her lack of shoes, the toy in her arms, before they slide over to the sandaime. "Hokage-sama," he greets, his tone a thin veneer of geniality over ice. "I believe you have been inconveniencing my student."

The hokage appears unimpressed by the hostility. "And I believe I had stationed three ANBU guards outside my office. Don't tell me they took an early lunch?"

The lame attempt at levity is met with a flat glare. "I taught those idiots everything they know," is all he says in response. "Do you need anything else, hokage-sama?"

"Zabuza's parting gift, when you have a chance."

The necklace is being lobbed at the sandaime before all of the words even leave his mouth. Sakura would gape at the impropriety if she wasn't too busy trying not to fall to her knees and starting bawling.

The sandaime nimbly catches it, of course, and then uses the other hand to wave at them dismissively. "You may go."

Sakura nearly stumbles over her feet in her haste to reach Kakashi-sensei but he meets her more than half way, already shucking his hoodie so he can stuff it over her head. The sudden warmth and rush of sensei-smell—cedarwood, old paper, dogs—is so deeply comforting and relieving that tears gather with renewed vigor in sakura's eyes.

"Can I carry you?" he crouches low, offering his arms, and Sakura nods. She appreciates him asking.

Once she’s certain the giant hoodie has been tugged down to thoroughly cover her bum, she wraps her arms around his neck, a deep sense of security finally returning when he sweeps her up.

Then, in what feels like a blink and a gentle rustling of the breeze, they’re outside, perched on the veranda of a building adjacent to the hokage’s office.

He gently sets her down on her feet, and Sakura’s toes curl on the frigid concrete. Even with the sweatshirt on, she feels cold.

“Where would you like to go?” he asks, crouching down low in front of her. She notices now his usual mask is gone, replaced by a black disposable surgical mask. A tiny bit more of his jaw is visible like this, which Sakura will have to be excited about later because suddenly she is *exhausted.*

“I want to go home,” she decides, but feels a shiver wrack her body when she thinks about her empty house, and it's not from the cold. Clutching her toy tighter and feeling terribly foolish, she amends, “But could some of the ninken stay with me?”

She would ask *him* to stay but is pretty certain the answer is no, and what would he do anyway, sit on her living room couch? So she doesn’t bother.

A gentle smile creases his eyes. “Honestly, I don’t think they’d let you be alone if you wanted it.”

She returns the smile, albeit a little shakily. Then she asks, “Sensei, did I do something bad?”

His face becomes pinched, but she doesn’t think the agitation is directed at her. “No, Sakura-chan, you didn’t,” he responds firmly. Then his sunny expression returns and it’s the one that beams insincerity. “The sandaime is getting on in age and I’m sure you’ve heard of this ailment called *dementia—”*

“Sensei,” Sakura cuts him off by slapping both palms over his mask. The reprimand is blunted by the obvious amusement in her voice. “You can’t *say* things like that!”

“I can say whatever I want,” his muffled response is rather mulish, and Sakura can literally feel him pout under the mask. Then his fingers start to fly through signs that Sakura recognizes as *old, crabby, senile, wrinkly*— she yelps, leaving one palm on the mask and using the other to slap at his seditious hands.

“Horrible, you’re horrible, sensei,” Sakura admonishes, but she’s giggling too.

This time when Kakashi-sensei drops her off, he takes her straight to her bedroom window from the rooftops. The genin is pleased to find a pile of eight dogs eagerly awaiting her, who have all done their part to warm up her duvet. She crawls into the puppy-pile under sensei’s watchful eye, finally beginning to feel the anxiety ebb away. The resulting adrenaline crash has her eyelids drooping, but before the lull of sweet unconsciousness can pull her under, she calls out quietly to her teacher.

“Sensei,” she says, resting her chin on Uhei’s shoulder. “Are Naruto and Sasuke-kun alright?”

Her teacher eye-smiles at her from where he’s crouched on an impossibly thin branch. *Another chakra trick, maybe,* she wonders muzzily.

“They did not receive the same welcome wagon that you did, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Sakura nods, relieved. “Good,” she mumbles. “‘Cuz then I’d hafta kick…the hokage’s…butt…”

And with that mumbled threat she falls asleep to Bull’s gentle snoring and the faint scent of ozone as numerous traps are secured around her window.

Sakura sleeps relatively soundly, despite the events of the night. She wakes a couple of times, a bone-white mask with slanted eyes appearing like a specter in her dreams, but the soft fur and body heat of eight dogs (not to mention wet noses in her armpit and neck) work like a charm to soothe her back to sleep again.

By the time she wakes, the sun has dropped in the sky and the shadows are long.

“I was supposed to meet the boys on the bridge,” is the first thing out of Sakura’s mouth.

All eight ninken proceed to go through some routine of stretching, yawning, and blinking sleepily, which causes an onslaught of adorableness so powerful that Sakura nearly starts to cry. She’s also a little emotionally fragile, for obvious reasons.

“Kakashi told ’em you weren’t feeling well,” Pakkun says, hunching over to scratch at his ear with a rear leg.

Sakura blinks. “Oh,” she nods, relieved. “That’s good.”

“What d’ya wanna do?” Akino asks, yawning again through his words. His teeth are so magnificently sharp, she notes. So useful.

Sakura hums, thinking. “I’d like to see them,” she decides. “Just so I know that they’re okay. I’m not sure if Sasuke-kun would appreciate the unannounced visit, though.” And while their friendship has certainly been growing stronger and Sasuke seems to feel something other than vague disdain whenever he lays eyes on her, Sakura doesn’t need to undo that progress by dropping by unexpectedly at his family home, which is sure to be wrought with all sorts of grim memories.

Actually, now that Sakura is thinking about it, it’s pretty dang sad that he still lives in that near-empty compound all by himself. Surely, that

can’t be good for his mental health? She should do something about that.

Not today, though. Today…she’s going to teach Naruto how to cook.

“Would one of you go check on Sasuke, though? Just to make sure?” Sakura asks, running her finger down Pakkun’s short snout just the way he likes it. “But like, stealthily?”

“I can do that, Sakura-san,” Uhei offers, dipping his slender head in acquiescence.

Smiling, Sakura offers Uhei her hand, allowing him to rest his chin in her palm briefly. The greyhound gets overwhelmed with large amounts of or repetitive physical contact, so she offers affection that he can accept or decline at his comfort. He does love her forehead smooches as much as the other ninken, though.

“Thank you, Uhei,” she murmurs, and begins to extract herself from the puppy pile. “Now, who wants to stop by the supermarket?”

The excited clamor is instantaneous, and Sakura feels her spirits lifting already.

Approximately thirty minutes later, the genin’s arms are weighed down by several grocery bags. She might have gone a *little* overboard but she has a hunch that Naruto hasn’t consumed more than a dozen vegetables over the course of his entire life, and also Pakkun had sensei’s wallet and the canned anmitsu was on sale, so…

Anyway, thankfully the ninken seem to know exactly where Naruto lives. The smile on Sakura’s face grows dimmer and dimmer as they make the appropriate turns and twists, eventually ending up in a neighborhood that’s practically crumbling before her very eyes.

“Naruto lives *here?”* she asks, then realizes it does kinda make sense, being that he’s an orphan…except, to her knowledge,

Konoha provides subsidized housing to orphans whose parents were shinobi. Maybe Naruto is civilian-born, like her? No, that can't be possible…she's seen his chakra reserves. That shit has to be genetic, or he's a freak of nature. Possible, but not probable.

But more than that, it's very obvious to her that Naruto and the hokage have some sort of special connection, which Sakura has attributed to a great many conspiracy theories ranging from illegitimate grandson to super secret spy bodyguard for the sole remaining Uchiha.

For the record, that second theory was pretty quickly tossed in the garbage can.

The hokage seems to be fond of Naruto, regardless of what the connection is, so why is he allowing a twelve-year-old to live in a place like this?

Sakura ruminates over this as the ninken lead her up a set of stairs on a weirdly oblong-shaped salmon-pink building. The external corridor that they feed into is short, hosting three doorways numbered rather nonsensically as 2F, 17, and 9B.

She is deposited at door 9B, with all ninken departing on their own business. Sakura bids them all goodbye with a forehead smooch and an extra whispered *thanks* to Uhei.

Shoring up her courage, Sakura knocks.

There's a beat, and then some commotion behind the door before it opens just a sliver. This is a little surprising to Sakura–she figured he would just throw the door open carelessly. The keen blue eye that peers out at her is first dark with cautious trepidation before it lights up with delight.

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto cries, and finally does throw open the door–or tries to, the sturdy chain lock halts it with a loud *clunk.*

“Oops, sorry, I gotta—one sec!” Naruto scrambles to shut the door, and the sound of a chain lock sliding free follows. This time when he opens the door, there’s a sheepish smile on his face.

“H-hi Sakura-chan!” he greets. “What are you doing here?”

Sakura returns his smile with a grin, and holds the grocery bags aloft. “I was gonna teach you how to cook, remember?”

His expression is stunned for a moment before it morphs into the sunniest thing she’s ever seen. Honestly, it reminds her of the ninken when she throws a really choice stick.

“Yeah!” he says. “Like training!” He even fumblingly signs the word *training* at the same time.

Sakura nods, pleased with his choice in wording. “Exactly.” A beat of silence. “Well, are you gonna let me in?”

Naruto jumps like he’s been zapped, immediately stepping out of the way so she can enter. “Oh, right! Yeah, come on in, Sakura-chan!” Then, apparently remembering his manners, says, “Here, let me grab those.”

Sakura hands over the bags and bends to peel off her sandals. The tiny genkan leading into his apartment contains exactly one pair of sandals—his, she presumes—and she tucks her own in right next to them. Then she straightens and follows him into the apartment...

…and pauses, stunned.

Naruto also freezes, expression worried. “Sorry,” he says, apparently interpreting her silence as horror. “It’s a bit messy in here.”

Except…it’s *not.*

Sakura blinks. It’s not messy, or even cluttered. To her absolute surprise, Naruto’s apartment is immaculate. It’s tiny and old, but completely free of clutter or mess.

The genkan leads into the studio's main room, which is just large enough for a cupboard, a bookcase, a positively archaic television, and a small kotatsu. A futon is neatly folded and tucked away beneath the cupboard, and the bookcase hosts a modest collection of books, a set of dumbbells, and two small plants. There are more plants on the sill of the single, large window on the south side of the studio, a tiny kitchen nook in the back, and a door that leads to what she presumes is the bathroom.

It's freaking *spotless.* Everything he owns—which isn't much—is kept clean and tidy and is clearly well-cared for. She follows his anxious gaze, and it lands on a lone bowl in the sink. *That's* what he's worried about?

"Naruto," she says slowly, awed. "This isn't messy. At *all.* You're tidier than I am!"

He blinks, unsure if that's an accusation or praise. "I'm…sorry?" he hazards.

Sakura is already shaking her head, making her way to the kitchen nook in the back. "Don't be, it's just surprising is all." Then she winces at the accidental insult.

But Naruto just nods in understanding, making Sakura realize even more thoroughly how much of a jerk she's been to this kid. "I can't afford to replace stuff much so I gotta take good care of what I've got," he offers by way of explanation.

Hmm. *Yes, Sakura, you are kind of an asshole,* she tells herself.

Well, no time like the present to repent, right?

"That's very responsible of you," she compliments, and is rewarded by a surprised, but happy look on Naruto's face.

"Thanks, Sakura-chan!" he chirps, then begins peering into the various grocery bags. "So, what is all this stuff? What are we

makin'?"

"Today we're starting simple," she says, and starts to put away the vegetables and meat into the fridge. It's empty, save for a carton of milk and a single, very sad looking apple. "We're gonna make rice balls!"

Naruto's eyes grow wider and wider with every bottle of sauce and bulb of garlic that emerge from the bag he's emptying. "We need all of this to make rice balls?" he asks, sounding aghast.

The frank horror in his voice sends Sakura into a peal of giggles. "No, I just figured you probably don't have a lot of the staples. A solid foundation is essential to good cooking!"

Naruto nods eagerly, then he digs that scraggly little notebook out of his pants pocket and starts looking for a pen.

Sakura feels her heart do funny things at the sight. Not in a crush way—*hell* no—but just…Naruto is a really good kid, she's starting to realize. Loud and sometimes obnoxious, but he's a ray of pure sunshine, too. As the boy begins to scribble down her words, she vows to protect that smile with everything she's got.

Suddenly, he's looking at her expectantly, and Sakura shakes off the solemnity and puts on her sensei hat. "Alright, let's start with the sauces. This is called *mirin…"*

And thus begins Naruto's beginner course to basic Japanese cooking. She introduces him to the most important seasonings—miso paste, rice vinegar, bonito flakes, sesame oil—and her own favorites, like chili crisp and kewpie mayo. Thankfully he is familiar with shoyu, and obviously does not need introduction to rice itself. He does, however, gasp rather dramatically when she presents him with her family's old rice cooker.

"Sakura-chan, I can't take that!" he shakes his head. "That's way too much. This is way too much already."

Sakura is already hunting for a good home for it, and discovers that it fits nicely on a shelf that is actually just a cabinet sans door, now that's looking at it.

"We have a new one, don't worry about it," she says, plugging it in. "And I bought all this stuff with sensei's money. Did you know he's *loaded?"*

Now *that* captures Naruto's attention, which had been her goal. "Wait, for real?! He's left us with his Ichiraku bill twice!"

Sakura nods eagerly, happy to have someone to commiserate with. "Yup, he's just stingy," she says, and takes the inner pot out of the rice cooker and hands it to Naruto. "Here, take this and put three cups of rice in it. I'm gonna show you how to wash rice properly."

And she does. Sakura also demonstrates how to trim the chewy bits off of a cheaper cut of pork, and the easiest method for peeling garlic. The rice simmers away while he practices mincing ("Keep your fingers curled! You need those for throwing shuriken!") and as Sakura extols on the virtues of canned fish ("A tin of mackerel, some mayo, shoyu, and chili crisp. Throw it on some rice and boom, dinner!"). The blond boy scribbles and scribbles away in his notebook, fingers sticking to the pages from the garlic and shoyu.

All in all, it's a rather pleasant evening. Naruto is a good a student as ever—diligent and curious—and together they prepare a veritable buffet of rice balls: some stuffed with garlic pork, others with spicy-mayo mackerel, couple plain with furikake, and even a few with umeboshi…though Naruto generously leaves those to Sakura.

Naruto cleans up the kitchen while Sakura finishes plating some rice balls (and tucks away the rest in the fridge), and she settles down at the kotatsu to wait.

"Does your TV work?" she asks, tucking her legs under the kotatsu blanket.

He pauses in his thorough scrubbing of the sink and makes a face. “Sort of?” His hand tilts back and forth in the sign for *part/piece,* which isn’t really grammatically correct but interpretable regardless.

“What does *sort of* mean?” Sakura asks with a snort.

“I don’t get cable, and the only movies I have are these super old, weird samurai movies that the previous tenant left behind,” he admits, and for some reason it’s jarring to hear Naruto say an adult-sounding word like *tenant.* He lives alone…all of the time, she realizes. Sakura is alone a fair amount since her parents travel a lot for work, but that’s nothing like being an orphan with his own apartment.

Naruto pays bills. He has a *lease.* He’s only freaking *twelve years old* and he might not know how to cook but he’s more grown-up than Sakura in ways that she probably can’t even imagine.

Weird.

“Let’s watch one while we eat,” she decides right then and there.

The movie is… *terrible.* It is absolutely, unequivocally atrocious and Sakura loves every second. For one thing, the actors speak in ridiculously low, monotonous voices—because they’re super serious samurai, of course—which means Sakura can’t hear squat unless she’s practically got her ear pressed up to the archaeologically significant television set. This prompts Naruto to attempt to narrate parts of the movie in FSL, except he keeps mixing up the signs for *stab* and *penetrate* (which are admittedly pretty similar) and it sends Sakura into wheezing, uncontrollable fits of honking laughter every time.

Also, the costumes are terrible. The main character’s bright blue wig seems to shift in its placement with every shot, resulting in a perpetually migrating hairline. Worst of all, however, are the fight scenes. Between the bad stunts and bogus special effects, the end

result is a bunch of dudes mumbling at each other between terrible jump cuts and splashes of very obviously tomato soup ‘blood.’

It might be the worst movie Sakura has ever seen, and also her favorite.

“Their special moves were *nonsense,”* Sakura says as she helps Naruto box up the rest of the leftover rice balls. “Like I get it, they’re samurai, so there’s no jutsu, but *come on.”*

Naruto is nodding in vigorous accord as she speaks. “Right? Like what the heck was that punching thing, anyway?”

“The punching thing was nuts,” she agrees. “How did he say it worked again?”

“Something about how the hit of the first knuckle breaks down the atomic defenses and the second…knuckle…does the damage, I think…?” Naruto tries, eyes squinting thoughtfully. Then he looks at his hands in confusion.

“Are my other joints…also knuckles? Or just my fist-knuckles? *Hmm.* The word knuckle sounds weird in my mouth, now.” This fascinating train of follow-up thoughts are mumbled too quietly for Sakura to hear, and are thus ultimately ignored.

“That’s right! The two-strike thing!” Sakura pounds her palm with a fist, then uncurls it halfway so she can sock Naruto gently in the forehead with the flat of her middle phalanges instead of her knuckles. “Careful, I just broke down your atomic defenses. If I follow through with this punch, you’re toast.”

Naruto laughs loudly at that, before bopping Sakura in a similar way. “Got ya back. We’re even!”

Sakura hums, mouth twisting in consideration. “Well, now what? We’re both atomically defenseless. One stubbed toe and we’re vaporized.”

Naruto returns the hum and crosses his arms as he thinks. “Maybe there’s a way to undo it? Atomic takesie-backsies?”

But Sakura is already shaking her head. “Probably not. You know what might help though?”

He looks at her. “What?”

Sakura holds up two cans of anmitsu and a pair of spoons. “Sugar.”

The grin he beams at her is positively sunny. “I like the way you think, Sakura-chan.”

Naruto and Sakura being adorable besties is my fucking JAM. Sakura is a weird little girl and Naruto is a weird little boy. Your honor they would get along like a house on fire if Kishi weren't such a dunce. (also yes, Sasuke will eventually be indoctrinated into this little squad)

Disclaimer: I am not deaf, nor hard of hearing! I hope that I am portraying Sakura's new disability in a sensible and empathetic way. I'll go ahead and say now she will NOT be receiving a miracle cure for her deafness at any point. She will develop ways to basically make chakra hearing aids for temporary use (spoiler, but w/e) but she will NOT magically lose her disability. Her disability will also not become some instrument of inspiration porn--she's just partially deaf now, and it will sometimes influence the way she trains/learns/progresses. If you think something I wrote was insensitive or ableist, pls let me know!

also yes I was shitting on rurouni kenshin lol.

As always, comments give me life. I love love love reading them. Thanks for reading!

Next time: Sakura's first training session with her eternal rival! Oh, boy!

Burning ambition (and...youth?)

Chapter 10: Burning ambition (and...youth?)

---

shows up seven months late with almost 8k words and a coffee

i won't bore you all with the long version of the story. the short of it: my mom was diagnosed with ALS. it kinda fucked up my whole everything. things are better now. she's doing well, all things considered.

thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to everyone who hasn't given up on this story.

onwards!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When Sakura gets up the next morning, she does so with quite the pep in her step, despite the tumultuous events of the day prior. She and Naruto had parted ways fairly late into the evening, with promises of meeting up again in a few days for another cooking lesson and more of those terrible samurai movies.

(Right before she walked out the door, they'd bumped fists, once again mimicking the stupid special punch from the movie. And yeah, maybe it's dumb to get excited about something like a secret handshake, but *whatever!)*

It's not until she's making her bed and she spots the pug plushie that some of the memories start to truly crystalize.

Sakura pauses in her fluffing of pillows, swallowing. The ninken had left earlier, around dawn, and she realizes abruptly that she's alone

again in her house. The same house that cat-mask had easily broken into and snatched her from.

Snatched her so she could be freaking *interrogated* in barely more than her underwear by her ex-best friend's *dad* and oh god he didn't say anything to Ino did he? *No, there's no way, that would be a major violation of some kind of rule, right?*

Although she would think that kidnapping a minor on the basis of paranoia and conjecture alone, with no real evidence of misdeed, is also against some kind of rule…?

Sakura blinks. Now that she's thinking about it, she knows exactly what rules *she* is supposed to follow–the academy made sure those were memorized by the end of second year. But…what rules does the village follow? Or the hokage, and who the hell enforces them? *Are* there any??

When she nearly explodes a pillow from squeezing it so hard in her fists, Sakura abruptly tosses it on the bed and marches over to her closet. Pondering the existence (or lack thereof) of checks and balances within the political framework of Konoha is *not* a productive line of thought right now, so she's tabling it. Distraction, she decides, will be served in the form of outfit selection for her first day of training with Lee.

Her first day of training…with her *Eternal Rival.*

The thought of Lee's effervescent smile actually manages to bring out one of her own, and she feels her spirits lift a little. He's just so dang cheerful!

Ultimately, Sakura decides on a pair of her spandex shorts and that T-shirt she liberated from Kakashi-sensei's apartment all those weeks ago when cleaning it. Her usual outfit can wait for regular Team Seven time…because something in her gut tells her that Eternal Rival training begets multiple showers.

Speaking of Team Seven and borrowed clothing, Sakura needs to figure out what to do with sensei's sweatshirt. She cooked *and* slept in it, so it definitely requires a wash before it can be returned. A quick sniff confirms this, and a peek in the hamper informs her there's not enough for a full load of laundry quite yet, so she tosses it in the basket to be laundered later this evening. *Future-Sakura's problem.*

Sakura snags two rice balls (made by Naruto, she can tell because they're rather misshapen), stuffs one in her mouth and heads out the door. Her rival awaits!

Ten minutes later and the pink-haired genin has reached training ground eleven. She can see two figures in bright green, which means Lee is already here, and Gai-sensei is as well.

"My most esteemed Rival!" Lee greets with great cheer as she approaches. "Hello! It is wonderful to see you!"

Sakura grins as she trots over to the pair, giving her half-pony a slightly nervous tug to tighten it. "Hi, Lee! Hi, Gai-sensei! It's good to see you too."

"Sakura-san, I'm happy to see you have returned safely!" Gai-sensei booms, and whatever lingering concerns Sakura might have had about her hearing loss impeding her training with these two is summarily assuaged. They're both *very* loud.

"I heard from Kakashi that your mission became a little more arduous than originally anticipated," he continues, and then gives her a very enthusiastic double thumbs-up. "But he said you rose to the challenge most auspiciously. Well done, student of my rival!"

Sakura returns the thumbs-up with one of her own, feeling quite pleased with herself. "Thanks Gai-sensei!" Then she turns to Lee and asks, "So what's on the docket for today?"

"We shall begin with a warm-up!" he declares. "Gai-sensei, if you please!"

“Roger!” he responds, before producing a small contraption from nowhere. Upon closer inspection, it appears to be a rolodex, like the kind her mama uses to store the business cards of fabric suppliers.

Sakura waits, hands clasped nervously behind her back, as Gai-sensei spins the rolodex before plucking out a card at random.

Meanwhile, Lee sidles over to Sakura and they both stand at attention as Gai-sensei takes out three more cards.

“We use that to keep the warm-ups and workouts randomized,” Lee begins to explain, before Sakura can ask. “It helps prevent one from getting into a rut, and also makes every morning a delightful surprise!”

Sakura hums, intrigued by the idea. Honestly, it’s smart. She finds herself sometimes dreading the list of exercises she’s queued up for herself the next morning—if she doesn’t know what to expect, she can’t anticipate how grueling and tedious they’ll be.

Gai-sensei considers the cards, flipping through them briefly before he declares, “Your warm-up shall be: ten sets of fifty push-ups, fifteen sets of thirty sit-ups, two-hundred lunges per leg, and a ten-minute plank!”

Sakura just blinks. “Excuse me?”

This…has to be a joke, right? Right?!

Lee just nods, utterly unperturbed. “A more relaxed warm-up today, Gai-sensei!” he observes, and begins doing some light stretches.

Sakura continues to stare blankly. *Relaxed?*

“Lee,” Sakura says, embarrassment already curling hot in her gut. “I don’t think I can do all of that.” *Or like, any of it.*

But Lee only beams a winsome smile at her. “Not a worry, Sakura-san! Simply do your best!” Then he seems to think for a second.

“Also, there’s no need to necessarily complete all sets of an exercise consecutively. You may mix and match as you wish!”

Sakura nods. Okay, that makes it…not exactly more manageable, but she can at least spread out the torture over her whole body, instead of doing nothing but push-ups until she literally dies.

With a fortifying breath, Sakura drops down to the ground and gets to work. She’ll never achieve one-finger push-ups like Kakashi-sensei by dithering around, after all.

It’s grueling, but also meditative, in a way. The only sounds echoing in the otherwise empty training grounds are the rustle of grass and her wheezes; Lee and Gai-sensei’s breathing are annoyingly unlabored.

Up, down, up, down, up, down. The idea of boosting her muscles with chakra is tempting, but she resists. This is meant to train her taijutsu alone, and Haruno Sakura does not cheat!

After three excruciating sets of push-ups, Sakura switches to sit-ups. It doesn’t take long for the burn to go from noticeable to intolerable. With a sigh, she scrambles upright and begins to lunge.

Unfortunately, Sakura only makes it through about a third of the warm-up when she nearly vomits from the exertion. She’s on her fifth total set of push-ups when her arms give, and she flops onto her belly like a dead fish, dreading to imagine what further horrors await her in that strange little rolodex thing of Gai-sensei’s.

Lee pauses in the middle of his bajillionth lunge, directing an expression of concern at her. “Are you alright, rival of mine?”

Sakura gives him a thumbs-up, cheek still pressed to the dirt. “Just need to catch my breath,” she lies, swallowing too much saliva. *Don’t barf!*

Then with a grunt she attempts to start her push ups once more, only to collapse as her arms give out from under her again.

Dammit! she curses internally, fingers curling in the grass. *Why am I so pathetic?*

The self-deprecation must show on her face because Lee pauses again and says, “Sakura-san, there’s no shame in not being able to finish! It took me a long time to get to the point of being able to complete a training regimen such as this.”

So…he expected her to fail? She scowls. “Then why give it to me if you know it’s gonna be too hard?” she asks, crabby from the nausea and her own failure.

Lee stops what he’s doing (a perfect plank) so he can sit and turn his attention to her fully. “Because I respect you, Sakura-san,” he says, not rising to the bait. “I’m your rival, not your teacher. It’s not up to me to decide what you can or cannot do.”

Once again Lee aims that charming, bright grin at her. “You were the one who taught me that feedback isn’t failure, after all!”

That gives Sakura pause. She scowls again, though this time the ire is directed entirely at herself. Then, embarrassingly, her bottom lip starts to wobble. To shield the sudden burning in her eyes from his view, Sakura ducks her head and hunches her shoulders. *Ugh.*

Shame prickling her scalp, she mutters, “I don’t wanna drag down your training session. You two should go do whatever you would usually do. I’ll be fine here.” *Dying of exhaustion and embarrassment.*

And then that traitorous lip wobble returns. “...Sorry I’m not a very good rival, Lee.”

But Lee is already shaking his head, though Gai-sensei is the one that responds.

“Nonsense, Sakura-san!” he cries, startling the hell out of her. She’d kind of forgotten he was here, somehow.

“It’s not the act of winning or losing that stokes the fires of youth!” he bellows. “You don’t compete to destroy one another, but to strive for a shared goal. An eternal rival is someone who pushes you. Someone who motivates you!”

She blinks up at him as Gai-sensei continues to speak, stunned to silence.

His megawatt smile softens into something more gentle. “They inspire you to greatness, because you respect more than just who they are, but who they can *become.* You trust their perseverance and push yourself accordingly. *That* is the beauty of an eternal rival!”

Lee, of course, is so moved by this speech that he immediately begins blubbering. For once, Sakura can’t really blame him—she’s tearing up a bit too. A heartbeat later and she is swept up into a bone-crunching group hug with the two lycra-clad ninjas, and finds herself sinking into the warmth.

“Besides,” Gai-sensei pulls away so he can rest one hand on Lee and Sakura’s shoulders. “Your competitions aren’t merely limited to feats of strength!”

He produces a stack of what appear to be cards (unrelated to the rolodex, thank the sage) and continues, “Nor is training limited to your body.”

Roughly ten minutes and a rather meandering explanation of the rules later, Sakura is on her hands and knees across from Lee who mirrors her position. Together, they hover over a display of cards laid out before them.

Uta-garuta. One of the oldest traditional card games. Gai-sensei holds a stack of one hundred yomifuda, each containing an entire poem, from which he recites the beginning lines. The cards in front

of the two genin—torifuda—only have the finishing phrases. As Gai begins to read each yomifuda, Lee and Sakura must locate the corresponding torifuda and grab it.

(Though the “grabbing” is more like “slapping.”)

Sakura has only played the game once or twice around new years with her cousins, and is deeply thankful for her admittedly excellent memory. Lee has played it more but doesn’t have her near-eidetic capabilities. It’s a game of speed, smarts, and reflexes…and because Sakura gets the okay to use a bit of chakra to help contend with Lee’s natural speed, they’re pretty evenly matched. Out of consideration for her hearing, Gai-sensei is positioned to Sakura’s right.

The result is a game of uta-garuta played at an absurdly breakneck pace. Gai-sensei doesn’t take more than a breath between yomifuda, so their arms are a blur as they swipe card after card.

“On a mountain slope, solitary, uncompanioned—”

Wham!

“Dang,” Sakura curses, fingers mere millimeters behind Lee’s as he sweeps the card from the display.

“Over the wide sea, as I sail and look around, it—”

Thwap!

This time Sakura reaches it first, swiping the corresponding torifuda with a flourish.

“Let me show him these! Even the fishermen’s sleeves on Ojima’s shores—”

Bang!

Lee again.

“If I see that bridge—”

Wham!

Sakura this time.

“As Mount Arima sends its rustling winds across—”

Bam!

Once again, Lee beats her to the card.

Back and forth they go, hands flashing out like lightning as Gai-sensei makes his way through the yomifuda. Lee gets two in a row, then she gets three. The display of cards between the genin has dwindled and now only a few remain, though the intensity crackling between them only grows.

Sakura is so utterly, entirely focused on the torifuda in front of her, chakra tingling in her fingertips, that she doesn’t notice the additional presence next to them hovering curiously by the game.

Gai-sensei inhales, readying to recite, and she mirrors it, letting the chakra in her heart-center vitalize the whole of her body as she breathes.

Then—

“Sakura-chan.”

Whap!

Startled by the sudden voice in her ear, Sakura yelps and slaps Lee clean across the face.

The chakra behind the blow sends him crashing to the ground, kicking up their spoils and the rest of the game into the air with a flutter.

“Oh *shi*— Lee!” Sakura cries, diving after the boy, who appears to be quite stunned. “Are you okay?!”

Then she whips around, glaring at the silver-haired newcomer. *“Kakashi-sensei,”* she admonishes, hands hovering fretfully over Lee’s prone form. “You startled me!”

He simply shrugs, hands stuffed into his pockets and appears utterly unrepentant. “Situational awareness is a key skill for any shinobi,” he quips. Then his eyes narrow. “Hey, is that my shirt?”

“Not anymore,” Sakura responds evasively. “What are you doing here, anyway?” Not that she isn’t happy to see him, because she absolutely is. But she really could have gone the day *without* maiming her eternal rival during their second-ever competition.

“The ninken miss you and wouldn’t stop whining during our morning walk, so here we are,” he drawls. “Also, it’s nearly nine already.”

Disappointingly, he’s back to his regular, boring jounin fatigues and mask. *Dang.*

That’s when Sakura notices the veritable herd of dogs trailing behind her teacher, who woof excitedly. Thrilled, she immediately abandons Lee and knee-walks over to her favorite furry pals to begin bestowing her usual forehead smooches. Yes, she did see them this morning, but so what? Sakura loves these mutts to the moon and back and will dote on them accordingly. Sue her.

“You really laid out poor Lee over there,” Pakkun says as she scratches behind his ears. “Merciless.”

Sakura’s head tilts curiously. “You know Lee?” she wonders aloud, and then realizes that duh, Kakashi-sensei is Gai-sensei’s rival, Gai-sensei is Lee’s mentor…of course they’ve met. Rats, she wanted to see the ninken react to Lee’s absurdity!

Speaking of Lee, she sheepishly turns her attention back to her slain nemesis—she probably ought to make sure he's okay. However, the boy is already receiving the healing power of slobbery kisses from Bull, Guruko, and Bisuke, and thus seems to be in much better shape already.

Before she can comment on this, Gai-sensei goes thundering by in order to snatch Kakashi-sensei into a tight embrace.

"Eternal rival, it is good to see you again!" Gai-sensei bellows, arms wrapped around a very long-suffering looking sensei. "We only spoke most briefly the other morning and you were quite consternated, so I am overjoyed to see you already looking so much more lively!"

Then he blinks, stepping back to grip Kakashi-sensei's shoulders at arm's length. "Rival!" he says again, hands squeezing the muscles of sensei's arms rather forwardly. "You're more… *robust* than I've ever seen you!"

Kakashi-sensei just shrugs, apparently relatively unbothered by the fondling. "Turns out it's easier to put on muscle when you're not suffering from chakra exhaustion twenty-four seven."

"Indeed!" Gai-sensei nods, giving Kakashi-sensei a hardy slap on the back after he pulls away.

A small, pleased smile curls Sakura's lips. It's cool to see that her efforts to help her teacher are having a lasting—if not compounding—positive effect. Really cool, in fact. Even if Kakashi's apparent increase in beefiness makes her a little jealous, because it seems like no matter how many push-ups Sakura does, her biceps never get any bigger. Ugh.

Kakashi-sensei tips his head curiously at Gai-sensei. "Have you finished tormenting our protégés yet, or is there more suffering yet to come?"

The lycra-clad jounin turns to consider the two younger nin at their feet. “While I believe there is always more wind left to fan the flames of youth,” he begins, arms akimbo. “I think we shall call it a day. Besides, with this extra time, my team can run twenty-five laps around the village for our cardiovascular training, instead of just twenty!”

Kakashi-sensei nods, already backing away. “Sounds fun,” he deadpans, before turning to Sakura and offering her a hand. “Shall we?”

Sakura blinks, reaching up reflexively to accept the help. “Oh, uh, sure,” she says as she’s pulled to her feet with absolutely zero perceptible effort from Kakashi-sensei. *Annoying.* But motivating too.

Then she glances down at her less than combat-ready attire. “Oh, I should probably run home and change,” she says, a little hesitant. “I don’t have most of my weapons with me.”

Kakashi-sensei hums. “You won’t need them today, but you can if you want.”

Now *that* catches Sakura’s attention. “Really?” she says, frowning curiously. “Why not?”

He merely hums again. “You’ll see.”

Cryptic as always. Sakura raises an unimpressed brow at him. “Careful though, sensei. If we leave now, we’ll arrive dangerously close to what some might consider *early,”* she quips, hands on her hips. “Your reputation of being an unrepentant lazybones would be in shambles.”

Kakashi-sensei shudders. “Perish the thought.”

Emboldened, and more than a little light-headed from the brutal workout she just endured, Sakura offers him a sunny smile. “Though maybe your notoriety could use a little refresh,” she comments,

baring her teeth just enough to be annoying but short of a true dominance display. “What was it that Gato called you? *Doddering?”*

Kakashi-sensei’s eyes narrow, though there’s no real fire in them. “Such cruelty so early in the morning,” he laments, hand laid on his chest like a heartbroken maiden. “Perhaps you need a bit more tiring out, hm?”

Instantly, Sakura regrets her cheek. One more lunge and she’s pretty sure her legs are going to fall straight off. “Nope, all good,” she amends, taking a few steps back. Then Sakura whirls, offering Lee and Gai-sensei a crisp salute.

“Thank you for today!” she chirps. “It was terrible, but in a good way. I’m looking forward to training again next week!”

Lee scrambles to his feet in order to return the salute. “Of course, Sakura-chan! I am also most looking forward to our next challenge!”

Oh, right. Sakura blinks. They were in the middle of a uta-garuta game, which is now beyond messed up, with torifuda and yomifuda scattered far and about. Also Guruko is chewing on one of the cards. “Hmm,” she hums, scratching her chin. “Do we call this a draw? Or plan to resume next week?”

Lee adopts a similarly thoughtful stance. “Perhaps resume next week? I was enjoying the competition.”

Sakura smiles, happy with the answer. “Me too,” she agrees.

They shake on it.

Water-walking.

The training Kakashi-sensei was being so cryptic about? It’s water-walking.

He makes a big show of building up to it, having the three genin of Team Seven sit on the edge of the river while he towers above them, a solemn look on face. He even recounts some of the battle with Zabuza, emphasizing the advantage the missing-nin had over them by way of being able to fight on land and on water.

“So today, you’ll learn how to do *this,”* Kakashi-sensei says, stepping out onto the surface of the lazily winding river. The water continues its path beneath his feet, but he doesn’t move.

Naruto reacts, predictably, with much enthusiasm. “Whoa! Sensei, what the heck!” He crows, leaping to his feet. Sasuke is more subdued, but he perks up with obvious interest.

Sakura is the only one to merely watch, sitting back on her haunches. She’s impressed by Kakashi-sensei’s mastery of the skill, no doubt—his sandals barely create any ripples—but water-walking itself isn’t particularly impressive to her. She figured it out weeks ago, on that fateful day she met Lee.

Kakashi-sensei’s head cocks to the side curiously when he notices her apparent disinterest. “Does our resident chakra-control savant already know this skill, perhaps?”

Sakura offers him a sheepish grin. “I might have figured it out a little while ago, yeah,” she admits. Studiously, she ignores Sasuke’s envious glare and Naruto’s wordless awed squawk.

Kakashi-sensei sighs, shoulders slumping. “You really know how to steal sensei’s thunder, Sakura-chan.”

“Sorry,” Sakura says, though without much sincerity. In her defense, she spent three whole days teaching Naruto and Sasuke chakra-adhesion, all but solidifying her mastery of the concept. Applying it to other surfaces like water was practically an afterthought. She says as much, and Kakashi-sensei nods in understanding, his gaze flickering between the three genin thoughtfully.

He's probably gonna make me teach them again, she realizes. Sakura deflates a little, fully anticipating having to reprise her role as *Sakura-sensei* when Kakashi-sensei sighs again, putting his hands on his hips.

"Well, this won't do," he murmurs. "Boys, you start practicing. Sakura-chan and I are going to work on something else."

Naruto salutes, already scrambling to his feet, and Sasuke follows. Sakura is too busy staring at Kakashi-sensei in open shock. *Something else? He's gonna train me...just me?*

The pride and warmth that bubbles up in Sakura's chest makes her grin, giddy at the thought. For once, *she's* the special one.

As Kakashi-sensei ambles off of the river, he points a thumb over his shoulder at the two boys, who are now standing before the water, and—rather uncharacteristically—taking a moment to look before they leap.

"Any brief words of advice for these two?" Sensei asks.

Sakura pauses to think. "Uh, try it with your sandals off, first?" She offers. "It might help you sense the water's natural energy better. And...try to remember you're working *with* the water, not against it. It's…cooperative, not coercive."

(Sakura is too deep in thought to notice the approving look that earns her from Kakashi-sensei.)

"I see, I see," Naruto nods, expression thoughtful. "Thanks, Sakura-chan!" He signs the sentiment as well, tapping the flat of the back of his left hand with a light chop from his right. It warms her to her core. They do the secret handshake, bumping their fists with stupid little smiles on their faces while Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei look on curiously.

Well, Kakashi-sensei is curious. Sasuke just looks bored.

As the boys take their first stab at water-walking (with much shouting and splashing), Kakashi-sensei leads Sakura a little ways away.

When he finally stops, Sakura can't help but bounce on her toes, anticipation curling in her gut. "So, what are we working on, sensei?"

"I thought we could give that chakra heat-proofing a go," he says, hands now stuffed into his pockets.

Sakura gasps, unable to refrain from hopping up and down excitedly. "Really?"

He nods. "Really. Now, walk me through what you came up with before."

"Sure," Sakura says, rocking back and forth on her heels as she tries to think back to her fight with Sasuke. "I figured that since chakra can stabilize and fortify muscle tissue to absorb large amounts of traumatic force—so like, kinetic energy—it should be able to absorb other kinds of energy as well."

Kakashi-sensei nods encouragingly, so Sakura forges on.

"I didn't think too much about it at the time because I was, er, a little busy, but…" Sakura trails off, trying to wrangle her thoughts in a coherent order. "I basically just coated myself with a layer of chakra that could absorb the heat, but…hm."

She trails off again with a hum, brows pinched in thought. Thankfully, Kakashi-sensei doesn't seem to mind her brainstorming, and waits patiently for her to continue.

"It might have worked somewhat, but I think there's a better way to do it," Sakura says with a nod. "Well, more like a combination of that and something else."

Now, Sakura is alternating between rocking on her feet and walking in small circles as she speaks. She's always been a fidgeter, picking

at her nails when she's anxious, tapping her toes while she reads, playing with her hair during class. It helps settle her thoughts, which always seems to be moving at a thousand miles an hour.

"I could…I could use my chakra to raise the specific heat capacity of my skin and muscles," she realizes with a start. "So the amount of energy required to raise one gram of it by one degree celsius will increase. Spread out over my whole body, the total amount of heat energy needed for ignition will be much greater!"

It's a freaking great idea, if she does say so herself. Combined with using a layer of absorptive chakra—like a fire-retardant blanket—she could probably withstand some serious heat before getting burned. The layering by itself could probably be pretty chakra-intensive, so the heat-capacity increase will be key to avoiding total exhaustion.

Pleased with herself and her innovation, she turns to Kakashi-sensei, only to find him looking rather faint.

"...Sensei?" she tries hesitantly. "Do you…do you think it won't work?"

"Your reasoning is sound," he responds eventually. "Though my knowledge of thermodynamics is probably a little rusty."

Sakura grins, but Kakashi-sensei still looks a little unwell. "Is everything okay, sensei?"

He doesn't answer immediately, studying her with a strange look for a few moments. "You talk about manipulating your chakra like you can effectively make it do whatever you want," he says quietly. "Can you?"

Sakura blinks. The question seems to be genuine, not a challenge, and it stumps her. "I mean, within reason, yes, kinda…?" she ventures. "Can't…most people?"

“No,” he says simply. “For many, hand signs are required to do any manipulation beyond circulation or adhesion. And even then, the signs act like a mold for them to shape it with in order to perform techniques.”

“Oh.” Sakura stares at him, eyes wide. “Well, it’s not like I can do *anything,”* she hedges. “I can’t like, magically turn it into a rock or fire or something. I don’t know any elemental techniques, so actually converting chakra into carbon or whatever, I can’t do.”

“But…” Kakashi-sensei tips his head, sensing a follow-up thought.

Sakura’s lips twist into a thoughtful frown. “We didn’t learn a whole lot about chakra theory in the Academy, but I’ve read about it a bit,” she begins. “Chakra is kinda like light, right? It’s both a particle *and* a wave, and has properties of both. It can be condensed or spread out, but it also radiates, and has a frequency.”

Kakashi-sensei nods, though he’s getting that weirdly nauseated look on his face again.

“Those inherent properties, the density and stuff, that’s what I’m changing. I think, anyway, ” Sakura says hesitantly. “Like…clay, I guess. I can keep altering the shape, but…I don’t have the kiln so I can’t make it a vase or a plate permanently. And I don’t have a lot, so it makes more sense for me to keep the clay as clay instead of committing it to a pot.”

She makes a face, frustrated with the difficulty of conveying her thoughts. “Does that make any sense?”

“It does,” Kakashi-sensei says, a little stiffly.

Sakura’s anxiety begins to simmer, unnerved by the odd tension in his body language. “Is what I’m doing bad? Or wrong?”

Abruptly, she’s reminded of the conversation they had not two days ago, standing on a veranda outside the hokage’s office.

Kakashi-sensei twitches before relaxing, apparently shaking off whatever agitation had befallen him. “No, not at all,” he says, dropping a large palm onto her hair to ruffle it. “But, I’m going to be very honest with you.”

His somber tone has Sakura straightening up immediately.

“Your aptitude with chakra manipulation is…unusual,” he murmurs, hand lowering to rest on her shoulder. “I haven’t seen anything like it.”

Sakura’s jaw drops. *No way.* Is she a genius after all?!

“A talent like that…it has extreme potential. There are people out there who would be very interested in acquiring you as an asset, and most of them do not have particularly gilded morals.”

Sakura swallows, her throat clicking dryly. Asset? *Acquire?*

She does not like those words.

“Going forward, it’s important that this talent of yours is not widely broadcasted,” he says. Then, correctly interpreting her bristling as indignation, continues, “I’m *not* saying don’t use it, or to limit your innovation, but merely to be careful about who you share your accomplishments with. Training like this should be done with me, and me only.”

Sakura deflates, her ire vanishing. “What about the boys?”

“They can be included, but I need to be present.”

Sakura bites her lip, considering, before she nods. It’s an entirely alien concept, the idea that someone would consider her interesting enough to be worth… *acquiring,* whatever that means. Then, a thought occurs to Sakura.

“A couple people already know about my chakra-cillia trick,” she points out, Kondo-san’s face flashing through her mind as anxiety

squeezes her heart in an icy grip. “And the whole Zabuza-arm-amputation thing, too.”

“I’ll do what I can to limit the spread of that information,” he vows.

Sakura nods, suddenly feeling nauseated from the anxiety. *Oh, sage, what have I gotten myself into now?*

Kakashi-sensei’s expression softens, and he squeezes her shoulder gently. “I’m sure this is overwhelming to hear,” he murmurs. “I promise I will do everything in my power to keep you out of the sights of those people, okay?”

Sakura nods again, offering him a shaky attempt at a smile. “And you’ll set Bull after anyone who tries anything?”

His eyes curve into friendly crescents. “I’ll wipe them off of the face of the earth.”

The severity of the promise is reduced only somewhat by the way he gently tweaks her nose after he finally releases her shoulder.

“Speaking of the ninken, how about one or two stay with you at night, until I have a better idea of what your reputation is turning out to be?” he suggests, much to Sakura’s delight.

“I’d love that!” she cries, warmth finally beginning to return to her veins.

“It’s settled,” Kakashi-sensei nods. Then with a brisk clap, says, “Okay! Now, we’ve discussed the theory of your technique, but let’s give it a test, shall we?”

Sakura stands to attention. “Yessir!”

As it turns out, Sakura’s theories *are* sound.

However, there is one very important component that she failed to anticipate: the law of conservation of energy.

“Ouch!”

Sakura yelps, frantically flapping her hand. Kakashi-sensei rears back a little from where he’s seated cross-legged before her, startled, because the match he had been holding has long since been blown out.

“What—”

But Sakura is already shaking her head, the answer swift in its arrival and now seeming ridiculously obvious.

“Energy can’t be created or destroyed,” she huffs, still flapping her hand as if to chase away the phantom flames. “My chakra absorbed the heat, and my skin too…and then it had nowhere to go. When I released my chakra, it was all still there.”

Her teacher nods slowly. “So, you just delayed the burn, rather than avoiding it.”

“Pretty much. Ugh, that *stings.”*

“So…”

“So, it means I need to figure out a way to sequester the heat and then channel it somewhere.”

“And how will you do that?”

Sakura looks at him strangely. “With chakra, *duh.”*

He raises his hands, as if in surrender. “Apologies, O Prodigious One, some of us plebes only have average chakra control and cannot conceive of such ideas.”

Sakura snorts. “Yeah, whatever, Mister Stabby-Lightning-Hand, I’m sure your Z-score is zero.”

He blinks. “My what score?”

“Nevermind, it’s a statistics joke,” she sighs, and plants herself back in front of him. “Alright, let’s go again.”

(Seated, he’s nearly eye-level with her standing. It’s infuriating.)

Kakashi-sensei’s nose wrinkles visibly beneath his mask. “Sage, you’re a nerd.”

Before she even realizes she’s done it, Sakura once again succumbs to her lesser whims and lunges at him, teeth snapping.

“Gah! Unhand me, foul beast!” Kakashi-sensei topples backward, one arm thrown up protectively in front of his face.

Sakura goes with him, canines sinking into the meat of his forearm. She should maybe feel bad about giving into her impulses so often these days, but it’s been a long morning, and roughhousing is fun, and he’s also an elite ninja who could have easily dodged, so…

Her victory doesn’t last long, however, because after barely a moment, her teacher vanishes in a *poof* and she finds herself chewing on sticks instead.

Spitting out the offending botanical matter, Sakura levels a massively unimpressed look at Kakashi-sensei, who is now crouched a few feet away.

“Real mature, sensei,” she snorts, perfectly aware of the hypocrisy.

One of his eyes twitches. “Me? I’m not the one who—you know what? Nevermind.”

Sakura snickers as a series of emotions pass over the visible fraction of her sensei’s face. Truly, messing with him has become too

easy.

“C’mon, let’s go again, I have an idea for how to sequester it,” she declares, trotting over to the jounin and making grabby hands for the matchbook.

“Is your hand okay?” he asks instead, holding it well beyond her reach.

“Totally fine,” she chirps, shoving said hand in his face and wiggling her fingers for emphasis.

Kakashi-sensei catches it to peer critically at her skin for a few moments before relinquishing. “Fine. Ready?”

Feeling her chakra bubble up, almost with excitement, Sakura grins. “Ready!”

A few hours and a couple more small burns later, Sakura has a pretty good idea of what to do in order to sequester the energy after absorbing it, and then channel it into a small, still-heat-proofed extremity, finally releasing it like a blast.

Now all she needs to do is figure out how to do it effectively. And also consistently.

In a word: better.

In two words: training required.

In three words: *much* training required.

Sakura finds herself scowling at her hands, annoyed with her lack of finesse with the technique. Sequestering even the tiny amount of heat from one match on a small patch of skin is proving to be rather difficult, and channeling it outwards, safely, even more so.

“Not being immediately perfect at the completely novel chakra-manipulation technique you just invented is not the transgression

against your talent that you seem to think it is," Kakashi-sensei comments dryly, easily reading the consternated look on her face.

"I know," Sakura grumbles, thinking back to the conversation the two of them had under that tree, on the same subject. "I *know,* it's just… ugh."

"It'll come with time," he murmurs, before standing. His knees crack loudly. "Oof, my everything."

He looks over to the riverbank, where Sasuke and Naruto have collapsed in wheezing, waterlogged lumps of blue and orange. Evidently, day one of water-walking resulted in limited success.

"I think that's about it for the day," he decides.

Sakura is about to protest when her vision swims, and she has to fist a hand in the back of Kakashi-sensei's flak jacket in order to not fall over. *Okay, maybe I overdid it…a little…*

Kakashi-sensei's gaze flickers between his three exhausted genin. "Hmm. I think I'll send you three home with a clone, to avoid any of you falling into a well or succumbing to some other tragic demise."

"I was gonna stop by the library on my way home," Sakura protests.

That earns a flat expression. "Thankfully, my clones can also exist within libraries," Kakashi-sensei says blandly.

"That's not what I—nevermind." Sakura sighs, resigning herself to being babysat for the remainder of the afternoon. Secretly, she's actually very glad to not be alone, but she can't have Kakashi-sensei knowing that! It'll go straight to his head.

After parting ways with the rest of Team Seven, Sakura heads to the library with her Clone-sensei in tow. She picks up a few dusty tomes on chakra theory, a thermodynamics textbook, and a Fire Sign Language guidebook along with a historical text about other sign-

languages used around the world. She only has to endure a modest amount of embarrassment when the librarian chides her for having so many loans out at once.

“This library is vastly under-utilized, and nobody has requested those texts in particular, but it’s the principle of the thing,” the librarian grumbles as she stamps the log in the back of Sakura’s selections. “Fifteen loans! Several of which are overdue, might I add.”

“I’m sorry,” Sakura bows, face flushing. “You’re right. I’ll return the books that I’m done with as soon as possible.”

“See to it that you do. And *you,”* she turns her bespectacled attention onto Clone-sensei, whose expression of amusement is swiftly being replaced by one of mild alarm.

“Me…?”

The librarian holds up a knobby finger before digging around in the drawers of her desk. After a quiet *aha!* she places a small stack of papers in front of him. “Do you have your inkan?”

He blinks. “I mean—yes, but—”

“Go ahead and stamp here,” she points to a line on the page, then flips it to the next one. “And here.”

“But I—”

“I asked for your seal, not your commentary,” she snips, gaze hard. “Now, here and here.”

Sakura watches in slack-jawed amazement as a nonplussed Clone-sensei pulls an inkan—a small stamp of his family name or crest—out of his flak jacket pocket and dabs it on an inkpad the librarian generously holds out. He stamps the two lines, one page then the next, before returning the seal to his pocket.

“Excellent.” She gathers up the papers, tapping them once on the desk to align the edges before she tucks them into a binder. Then, she turns to Sakura and says, “You now have access to some of the chuunin-level contents of this library. You cannot borrow them, but you may read them while on the premises.”

What?

The librarian levels her with an intense look. “Don’t make me regret this. Now, shoo!”

The two members of Team Seven are all but evicted from the library, and find themselves standing on the sidewalk in front of it with twin expressions of total confusion.

“I have no idea why that happened,” Sakura says in response to Clone-sensei’s questioning look. “Uh, is Main-Body-Sensei going to be mad…?”

But Clone-sensei just waves a dismissive hand. “Nah,” he says. “Don’t worry about it.”

Sakura eyes him critically. “If you say so.”

The remainder of the journey to Sakura’s house is uneventful, and Clone-sensei promises the later arrival of a few ninken before he offers Sakura a lazy salute and *poofs* out of existence on her front step.

Sakura cracks open the historical book on other sign-languages as she rummages for her keys in her rear pouch, and then is extremely disturbed to find the front door unlocked.

There’s no way I forgot to lock it. Sakura’s hand hovers over the doorknob, trembling. Surely, if there were dangerous enemies in her house, Clone-sensei would have sensed it, right?

Right?

Arming herself with nothing but some heavy books and her keys, Sakura all but kicks the door open, only to find—

“Sakura!” Her mother Mebuki trills, arms open wide as she steps into the genkan. “Welcome home!”

It is only Sakura’s iron-clad respect for the concept of literature as a whole that has her carefully setting down her spoils (instead of throwing them onto the ground) before she leaps into her mother’s arms.

“Mama!” she cries, hugging the woman tight. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Oh, my little monkey,” Mebuki sighs, pressing a kiss against Sakura’s forehead. “I’m very happy to be home. Are you hungry?”

The tantalizing smell of meat and garlic hits Sakura’s nose, then, and she grins toothily. *"Starving."*

Less than ten minutes later, Sakura is seated at the dinner table with both of her parents, stuffing her face with chicken and rice. They apprise her with tales of their travels, of stingy fabric sellers in Iron and a new leek plague in Grass. Her uncle in eastern Fire is doing well, her aunt in southern Fire is dealing with a bad knee. Grandma and Grandpa in Hot Water are as curmudgeonly as ever.

In turn, Sakura gives them an extremely neutered version of the events of the last month, summing up her experience in Wave as “exciting and educational,” and her recent training exploits as “playing around with chakra.”

The interrogation of the other day is left out entirely.

Guilt bubbles uncomfortably in Sakura’s gut as her parents accept the stories with zero suspicion, and it seems like the usually-faint ringing in her left ear is louder than normal. A clanging reprimand of her dishonesty.

But, like the real shinobi she is, Sakura continues to lie through her teeth. Mostly by omission, but the point remains.

“I threw some of your stuff in a load of laundry, by the way,” her mother remarks as they clean up the dinner table. “I hope that’s alright. Is oversized in style right now?”

Sakura blinks at the apparent non-sequitur. “Pardon?”

“I noticed the shirt you’re wearing and one of your sweatshirts are quite large,” Mebuki says absently, scrubbing at a plate. “Is that trendy right now? My clientele is usually older, so I’m not very hip to the trends of you youngin’s.”

Sakura snorts at the phrase *youngin’,* but shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so. I actually borrowed the hoodie from my teacher. I was cold and he lent it to me.”

True, if not an understatement.

For some reason, *that* gets Mebuki’s attention. “Really?” she asks. “I never knew Hatake-san to be the fashionable type. It’s a very nice sweatshirt. The cotton is one-hundred percent organic from Rice, dyed with walnut hulls from Tea. Certainly flattering on a man of Hatake-san’s, er…physique.”

Her mother’s face gets a little red as she smiles dreamily, and Sakura feels something shrivel up inside and *die.*

“Mom,” she admonishes, drying the bowl in her hands with probably a bit too much force. “What if dad hears you?!”

Her mother snorts. “He’d agree with me,” she trills. “Wouldn’t you, dear?”

Her father’s head pops out from around the corner, where he’d been folding laundry in the living room.

“Agree with what?”

“Hatake Kakashi,” she says. “Handsome man, don’t you think?”

“Oh, certainly!” Kizashi nods. “I’m sure I’d find him even more dashing if I knew what he looked like.”

Her mother laughs, and Sakura wonders if there’s a technique for launching oneself into the sun, because *good grief.*

“Anyway, it’s nice to see a skilled, renowned shinobi who doesn’t sacrifice style,” Mebuki continues. “Good for him.”

Sakura pauses in her drying. “Oh, uh…I think those are his civilian clothes,” she says haltingly. “He just wears the standard jounin fatigues while on the job.”

Her mother *gasps* as if mortally wounded, dropping the glass in her hands. It’s only Sakura’s whip-crack reflexes that rescue it from being shattered.

“No,” Mebuki laments, true horror in her voice. “Those heinous *rags?* On him? That’s tragic! I won’t stand for it!”

“Uh,” Sakura manages. She does *not* love where this is going.

“I’ll put something together and you can take it to him,” Mebuki decides. “Something simple and classic but still says *my bingo book bounty is fifty million Ryo.”*

“I don’t think—wait, why do you know that?”

But Mebuki has stopped listening and is clearly in *Create Mode,* a version of herself that will not be stopped until whatever she is crafting is acceptably finished. She abandons the sink, still half-full of dishes, and heads to her studio down the hall.

Sakura can only watch, dismay pooling in her gut. *Oh, no.*

Mechanically, Sakura finishes washing the dishes before she goes to join her dad in folding the rest of the laundry. Upon seeing her

stricken expression, he merely laughs. *Traitor.*

“Your mother is a force to be reckoned with, isn’t she?” he chuckles, affection warming his tone.

Sakura sighs, unable to fully maintain her crabbiness in the face of such naked fondness. A love like the one her parents share is what she’d like to have some day; full of humor and sweetness.

It’s…really hard to imagine Sasuke laughing like that, finding joy in the absurd. It’s hard to imagine him laughing, *period.* Has he even smiled around her?

The thought curdles Sakura’s remaining cheer, and she scowls at the shirt in her hands.

“Oh, come on,” her father nudges her shoulder, probably assuming her sour expression is in response to her mother’s antics. “You know she means well. Besides, imagine how much you can lord it over that Yamanaka girl when your sensei is dressed all snazzy. That’s gotta be worth some cool points, right?”

Sakura can’t help her amused snort, feeling her spirits lighten at the thought; though perhaps not as much as they might have a few weeks ago. Somehow, one-upping Ino just for the sake of it doesn’t have quite the same appeal as it used to.

After finishing the laundry, Sakura excuses herself to wash up and go to bed. The door to her mother’s studio is closed, and while it’s not locked, the unspoken policy has always been: open means *feel free to come hang out,* while closed means *please do not disturb, I am focusing.*

And for all of Sakura’s gripes about her mom wanting to style Kakashi-sensei, she respects an artist at work.

With that thought, Sakura throws open her bedroom door, her teeth brushed, skin routine complete, and pajamas on. It’s time to devour

some of those new books and—

“Good evening, pup.”

Sakura stops dead, frozen at the sight of Pakkun lounging on her duvet. *No.*

“How much did you hear?” Sakura grinds out between clenched teeth. *Please, sage, no.*

Pakkun merely gives her a fanged, doggy grin. “So, Kakashi’s *physique,* eh?”

Wordlessly, Sakura flings herself onto the bed and muffles an exasperated scream with her pink, fluffy pillows.

Ugh.

---

did you miss the training montages? i hope not, because this one was a doozy lol.

it's fun to write Sakura as an ADHD-having, on the spectrum, weird and semi-feral little girl. because weird little girls will save the world. also, i love how much you all love protective pack dad kakashi, because i love him too. more pack feels cometh!

comments bring me joy and inspiration. love you all!

next time: team 7 starts a new, actually-C-ranked mission. it all goes swimmingly and no one gets hurt. or...who am i kidding? >:)

Upon the precipice of knowing

Chapter 11: Upon the precipice of knowing

---

thank you all for all of your kind words about the last chapter, and my family situation. the naruto fandom—and Sakura stans specifically—continue to be the kindest, sweetest, most thoughtful people.

enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When Sakura arrives at play-time the next morning, a few brown paper-bags weighed down with fabric and a smug-looking Pakkun in tow, she's already feeling a little crabby.

"Here you go, dear," her mother had said earlier that morning, pushing the bags into Sakura's reluctant hands. *"Oh, and could you pick up some rice on your way home?"*

Then, when the faces of the ninken who greet her are all some variation of amusement, apparently somehow already aware of last night's embarrassing events, her crabbiness only grows. To her horror, Akino snatches a bag from her and vanishes before she can protest.

Sakura *does* manage to throw the stick further than ever before, though. Spite is evidently a decent motivator.

Eventually the ninken take pity on her and cease with the teasing, and call off training in favor of good, old-fashioned rough-housing. Sakura gets to spend the next hour alternating between trying out somewhat bastardized Judo moves on the dogs and puppy-pile snuggling. All in all, it does a decent job of improving her mood.

Waiting at the bridge is, unfortunately, it's own form of torture. As the minutes crawl by, Sakura stresses herself out by imagining all of the terrible ways her sensei could reject the offering and embarrass her, ranging from the *likely* ("Hmm, not for me, but tell your mother I said thank you,") to the *extremely unlikely but still technically possible* ("I hate these. Also you're fired from being a ninja forever.")

Ignorant to her anguish, Sasuke and Naruto continue their daily ritual of volleying petty insults back and forth until one of them snaps and fists start flying.

Eventually, Sakura is semi-convinced that the gesture is the end of her shinobi career.

Over before it even began, she despairs.

Then Kakashi-sensei arrives, and all Sakura can do is gape.

"Yo," he greets, giving the three genin a two-fingered salute. "I see you're being productive this morning, as usual."

"Whoa, Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto crows, releasing the grip he has on Sasuke's collar in order to dash up to their teacher. "You look so cool!"

"Oh?" Kakashi-sensei drawls "Little old me?"

His tone is flat and desert-dry, but there's a crinkle around his eyes that betrays a vein of genuine pleasure in the words.

And Sakura…well, Sakura has to hand it to her mother. The woman knows what she's doing.

Gone is the flak vest, replaced by a thick green bomber jacket with a shearling-lined collar and plenty of pockets for storing scrolls and whatnot. One shoulder is emblazoned with the red swirl, the other with what she assumes to be the Hatake crest. Underneath he wears the infamous black hoodie, accompanied by the stretchy undershirt

that also serves as his mask, and his usual armored gloves. A sleeker, more tailored version of the black jounin fatigue pants with subtle armored kneepads completes the look.

Naruto is right, he *does* look cool. And…a little younger. The hood pulled loosely over his riotous silver hair only adds to the rakish aesthetic, and Sakura feels her face flame for an entirely different reason than embarrassment.

Oh, no.

“Courtesy of Sakura-chan’s very generous mother,” Kakashi-sensei explains in response to Naruto’s continued awed pestering. Even Sasuke looks intrigued.

“Aw man,” Naruto deflates a little, though he’s still tugging curiously at the sleeves of Kakashi-sensei’s new jacket. “No fair, wish I had a —I mean, knew someone who could make stuff like this.”

There’s a raw, genuine sadness in Naruto’s voice, and it cuts Sakura straight to her core.

Mom, she thinks fervently, *I will never doubt you again.*

“Well, you’re in luck,” Sakura declares, pulling out the other two brown bags her mother had sent her off with. “My mom made you guys something too.”

“No way!” Naruto’s eyes all but pop out of his head, and his hands tremble when they receive the bag.

Sasuke appears to be a mixture of skeptical and begrudgingly curious, but he accepts the offering anyway.

“It’s just outerwear, not a whole outfit,” Sakura says, reciting her mother’s words. “But if you like them, she can make you shirts and stuff too.”

Naruto barely pays her any heed as he—surprising Sakura once again—opens the bag with utmost care, revealing the sturdy windbreaker. It's styled similarly to his own (though it's black with orange accents, rather than the other way around), comes with a hood, and like Kakashi-sensei's, is made with a shinobi in mind.

"This…this is *amazing,"* he breathes, and proceeds to shuck off his jacket and shrug on the new one with zero hesitation. "Oh, man, it's so soft and warm, but not like, too warm? This is so great!"

Sakura grins, rocking back and forth on her heels. "Glad you like it," she chirps, a feeling of pride pervading her body, even if she contributed absolutely zero effort to the construction of said jacket. Hey, delivery is important too!

Then, to her ever-growing surprise, Sasuke has pulled out his own piece, rather than refusing to look at it (as she had anticipated).

"It's a hanten," Sakura explains, a little unnecessarily, because Sasuke is probably aware of one of the oldest traditional jackets, *duh.*

He turns it over in his hands, gaze catching on the hand-embroidered uchiwa fan on the back.

"My mom has had Uchiha clients before," Sakura continues, and then regrets bringing up his family because sage, Sakura, *really?* But at this point she's already dug her grave, may as well get comfortable in there.

"She said they tended to run cold, which seems contradictory to commonly having fire natures but apparently that might be actually be an adaptation, in order to keep the internal organs from overheating while generating so much fire, so warmer wear was a frequent request and she figured you would prefer something more traditional and—"

“It’s fine,” Sasuke cuts her off, rescuing Sakura from her verbal spiral. Then he wordlessly signs, *“It’s nice. Thank you.”*

Valiantly attempting to smother her happy tears (okay, they’re a bit anxiety-related too), Sakura enthusiastically signs back *“You’re welcome!”*

He pulls it on, even going so far as to knot the little ties at the front. It looks good on him, as she suspected it would. Someone with Sasuke’s features is practically *made* to wear traditional clothing, even some as simple as a hanten. It just suits him so well!

Determined not to ruin the tenuous moment of connection with too much staring, Sakura turns her attention to their teacher.

“So, what’re we doing today, sensei?”

“The boys will continue working on water-walking, and you will keep working on the chakra heat-proofing,” sensei says. “Oh, and we have another mission, but that doesn’t start until tomorrow.”

All three genin perk up to attention.

“A D-rank?” Sakura hazards. *Probably pulling weeds or airing out futons or something, right?*

But sensei is already shaking his head. “No, another C-rank.” Then his eyes crinkle with amusement. “An actual C-rank, this time.”

Naruto begins hopping around with glee, and while Sakura is also excited, in theory but…

“We just got back,” she says. She was kinda hoping she could get in at least two training sessions with her Eternal Rival before shoving off again. And her parents *just* got home, too.

“It is a bit soon,” Kakashi-sensei acknowledges. “But it’ll be quick, maybe a week tops if we stop to train. And it seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up.”

He then pulls out a small scroll from one of the many hidden pockets of his jacket. It's oddly ornate, with gilded dowels and from what she can see of it, an embroidered fabric backing in deep reds and golds. Fancy.

"We'll be delivering this on behalf of the Daimyo's cousin, Yoshida Yuu," he says, before tucking it back into his jacket. "To a woman named Kimura Nobuko in northeastern Fire, who he is courting."

Sakura gasps, hands flying to her cheeks. "A love letter?!"

Kakashi-sensei nods, appearing amused at her sudden spike in enthusiasm. "Apparently he's quite the poet."

"Gross," Naruto mutters, but Sakura ignores him.

"That's so *romantic,"* she all but swoons. A nobleman sending a sweet letter to his long-distance love? It's straight out of a fairy tale! "Who is she?"

"A civilian, apparently. Thirty-seven. Immigrated from Rice with her grandmother when she was a child. Enjoys shogi and dango." Kakashi-sensei rattles off these facts like they're stats from a bingo book, and Sakura chooses to ignore how creepy it is that the woman has been profiled like an assassination target.

"Nobles also have no concept of money, so the pay is ridiculous," Kakashi-sensei adds, before reciting a number that has Sakura's jaw dropping in shock.

"Nevermind, I'm in," Naruto says sternly. "That's bonkers. I could buy so much ramen!"

Sakura's eyes go a little glazed over. "Or anmitsu…"

"Or tomatoes."

All attention turns to Sasuke, who bristles under it. "What? The tomatoes from the farmer's market are expensive," he mutters,

looking very much like he wishes he'd never said anything.

Sakura, however, lunges for the conversational olive branch like a girl possessed.

"No doubt," she agrees, suddenly thankful for being subjected to her dad's random lectures on plant phylogeny. "Anything fancy in the nightshade family is just ludicrously pricy."

Sasuke looks mildly surprised by the comment, but it vanishes quickly under his usual veneer of emotionlessness. However, he does offer a microscopic nod of acknowledgment. From him, that's practically a high-five. *Hell yeah.*

Sakura will take it.

The rest of the day passes in relative calm. The boys make decent progress with water-walking, each able to spend a few seconds wobbling on the surface before they sink. Sakura's progress with the heat-proofing is…marginal at best, but still technically progress. The amount of chakra required to sequester something as intangible as heat energy is turning out to be a *lot.* If only she had a vessel of some kind…

Sakura also takes a few breaks to give Naruto and Sasuke practical demonstrations of water-walking, partially to be helpful, but mostly to help remind herself that she is, in fact, good at some things, some of the time.

She also manages to convince Naruto into letting her practice some simple Judo moves on him during their lunch break, though it doesn't take much after she shows him a few of the diagrams in *Kuzushi no ri.*

"Ooh, heck yeah, gimme your best shot!" he chirps, and Sakura doesn't need to be told twice.

He takes the clumsy bodyslams like a champ, and Sakura sends a prayer of thanks to the powers that be for giving her such a hardy teammate. It's a little weird, at first, being so physically close to the boy; grabbing his T-shirt (the windbreaker was spared the ordeal) and throwing an arm around his neck, bumping her hips against his to throw off his balance.

She half-expects him to be weird about it, but he's a polite victim in addition to being a willing one. The hours they spent giggling and stuffing their faces with rice together probably helped, she surmises, and then seizes him for another attempt at a koshi-guruma throw.

Sakura lets Naruto try a few times too, because fair is fair. His lack of knowledge in the art is obvious, but his natural strength covers a lot of ground, and Sakura finds herself winded and spitting out mouthfuls of grass more than once. Sasuke is a silent observer, while Kakashi-sensei acts as pseudo-referee, offering them each a score out of ten for every throw. When the practice throws eventually devolve into aimless, playful tussling, he pulls them apart and tells them to eat their damn food.

"When we sparred before Wave, that was a Judo move you used, right?" Sasuke asks, out of nowhere.

The question startles Sakura so much she nearly drops her bento, a piece of tamagoyaki slipping out of her chopsticks and hitting the ground. "Uh, yes it was, Sasuke-kun!" she nods eagerly. "A yama-arashi throw. Well, an approximation of one, anyway."

He nods, expression considering. "Using your opponent's momentum against them is a good strategy," Sasuke acknowledges. Naruto's head bobs in agreement.

Sakura could *die* she's so happy at the praise, and nods excitedly. "Thanks, Sasuke-kun! Yeah, I'm hoping to figure out a way to combine it with high speed as my main offensive gambit."

It feels a little ridiculous to say such big, confident words. *Sakura,* with an offensive gambit? In what world?

“That’s sensible,” he murmurs. “At least if you’re fighting a slugger. An opponent with greater finesse could be tricky though.”

“D-definitely! Thankfully, the training I’ve done with the ninken is helping me learn how to reinforce and strengthen my muscles. I can pack a bigger punch.”

Sasuke’s mouth crooks into the tiniest of amused smirks. “I’m aware.”

And wow, if Sakura’s face turned a little pink earlier at Kakashi-sensei in his new outfit, it has *nothing* on the incandescence of her cheeks right now. Truly, you could cook an egg on her skin. Not to mention the suddenly clammy hands.

Sakura pauses, struck dumb by an idea.

Bento abandoned, Sakura brings both of her palms close to her face to examine them. *If chakra can be used to stimulate metabolic processes for performing a flicker…*

Well, then, maybe it can be used to induce sweating too.

Ignoring her teammates’ curious calls of her name, Sakura takes a few moments to peel back the fabric of her armguards and flush her palms with chakra. They begin to tingle.

Sweating, Sakura knows, is regulated by the hypothalamus as a physiological response to increased core temperature. She *could* start there, and try to use chakra to induce the sudomotor response, but…first of all, using chakra on her literal brain seems like a bad idea for a novice. Secondly, she may as well just go straight to the source. If Sakura’s memory of that chakra-anatomy book is correct (and it is, because near-eidetic, ha!) then sweat glands are regulated by some variation of the sodium-potassium-chloride cotransport

model, a kind of protein found throughout the body and that is especially implicated in organs that secrete fluids.

Okay, so use chakra in the place of calcium? No, that seems risky. She could trigger way too many things by accident.

“So, chakra as acetylcholine, then,” she mutters to herself. Synthetic cholinergic stimulation.

Sakura allows her eyes to fall shut, using one hand to plug her good ear and the other, she focuses on, palm upturned. The sudden quiet is a little jarring, but makes it much easier to concentrate.

The amount of chakra required is, of course, *tiny.*

What is the smallest unit of chakra? Sakura wonders briefly. *Can it be quantified?*

She thinks back to looking at grains of sand under a microscope once, in a geology museum in northeastern Fire country. She had been shocked to see the diversity of shapes and textures and colors, all lost to the naked human eye. Her chakra needs to be smaller than that, tiny enough that it could fit within the grooves of a single grain. *Smaller, smaller, smaller.*

And here’s the thing…despite her near-eidetic memory, it’s not like Sakura has memorized the molecular structure of acetylcholine or whatever, or can mimic its shape and charge and biomechanics by sheer force of will…but it’s like her chakra understands her intent, and together they intuit what is needed. She’ll have to ask Kakashi-sensei later if that’s normal.

She ponders this, wiggling the teeny, teeny bits of chakra in her hand until they take a shape that just fits, feels right for what she wants, and then leans into it.

Her palms prickle, and…

“Ha!” she cries, eyes popping open. Indeed, a sheen of moisture has accumulated on her palm. She summons more chakra, carefully feeding it into the receptors, and is rewarded with actual beads of sweat appearing. *Shannaro!*

Ecstatic at her own innovation, Sakura shoves the hand into Kakashi-sensei’s face, who is slouched next to her under a tree.

“Look!” she cries. “Sweat!”

He blinks. “Uh…do you want a towel?”

“No, dummy,” Sakura rolls her eyes. “This is it, this is the solution to the heat-proofing! I can use my chakra to stimulate my sweat glands and then sequester the heat into the water! Water has a crazy high specific heat capacity, so it’s the perfect vessel. Then I can just let it evaporate— *or* I could even maybe concentrate it? Collect the sweat in my hand, and then—”

In a moment of inspiration (and impulsivity, perhaps) Sakura manipulates the chakra in her hand like she’s trying to adhere it to something, mixing it with the natural energy in the liquid. To her delight, it follows eagerly, forming a little orb of water in the center of her palm.

“Ha! I wonder, if the water is hot enough, maybe I could make it spontaneously boil with a little more chakra? Like a blast of steam! Oh, that would be so cool, don’t you think, sensei?”

Sakura turns to him, thrilled beyond belief, only to find that same pale, somewhat nauseated expression of the day prior.

“...sensei?”

Naruto responds before Kakashi-sensei can, bursting with enthusiasm, as usual.

“Wahhh, Sakura-chan, you’re a genius!” he cries. “You’re so good at the chakra stuff! Like, you focus for two seconds and your chakra goes *brrrr* and *wshhhh* and *fashoooom,* it’s so cool!”

That stops Sakura short, but before she can say anything, Sasuke interrupts, “You can sense what her chakra is doing?”

Naruto’s head tilts to one side like a curious dog. “I mean, yeah? Can’t you? Like you see it but not really, ‘cuz it’s not like visible, but the feeling of the colors are there?”

Sasuke’s expression is a little pinched when he shakes his head. “No.”

The sickly look on Kakashi-sensei’s face seems to have only worsened. “Naruto, are you able to sense most people’s chakra?” he asks, looking like for all the world he doesn’t want to know the answer.

Naruto scratches his head. “I mean, kinda? Because of the—because I have a bunch of chakra,” Naruto begins. “It can be hard to sense other people’s. Like, it would be hard to see where a flashlight is pointing during the daytime, if that makes sense…?”

Sakura nods encouragingly, though internally she’s reeling a little bit at the idea of Naruto of all people being a sensor-type, or even adjacent to it. He must have an insane amount of chakra, too, if it’s capable of blotting out that of others. “That makes perfect sense, Naruto,” she says.

He grins sweetly at the words. “But people I like or that I spend a buncha time with, I can usually see theirs okay,” he adds. “Like, right now Kakashi-sensei, yours is doing something kinda swirly ‘round your chest! It reminds me of the trick Iruka-sensei showed me once, when I start to freak out and can’t stop breathing super fast.”

“I see,” Kakashi-sensei croaks.

Sakura feels her stomach drop at both of the implications; that Naruto has panic attacks frequently enough to need such a trick, and that Kakashi-sensei is currently experiencing an amount of anxiety that employing it is warranted.

So, she opts to focus on the positive. “You know, I bet if you learned how to do chakra-meditation, you could see past your own chakra whenever you wanted,” Sakura points out. “Want me to teach you how?”

Naruto positively *beams.* “Really, Sakura-chan?”

She grins. “Of course! We can practice while we train your cooking, and meditate while the rice simmers n’ stuff. Kill two birds with one kunai!”

He nods. “Yeah, yeah!”

Sakura mirrors the nod, but her mind has already taken off in another direction, as it is wont to do.

“Man, it’s just fascinating,” she says, gaze flickering between her three teammates. “The intersection of biology and chakra. Like, my chakra control, Naruto’s sensor abilities, and Sasuke-kun’s sharingan, those are all phenotypes, right? Genetic traits that have morphological expression. There’s something about the way our bodies are built that result in these abilities.”

Sakura’s mouth twists thoughtfully. “Abilities that are related to chakra, powered by it, but not necessarily *made* of chakra. They’re not chakra-based constructs in the same way a fireball or shadow clone are, right? Or else there would be a way to recreate them with ninjutsu.”

The rest of Team Seven merely stares as Sakura continues rambling, words coming faster and faster.

“Obviously, applications of some of these traits can be mimicked—Kakashi-sensei was able to copy me opening and closing my eye tenketsu—but he didn’t gain that level of control with anything else. I’m not sure if sensing could be copied at all. Presumably other Bloodline Limits are similar, like Shodaime-sama’s Mokuton, and require some kind of coalescence of chakra and phenotype…like, maybe some kinds of chakra can only be created by certain people with certain genes?”

Sakura shakes her head, almost in disbelief. “And I mean, that sentence in itself is kinda crazy, because chakra is chakra. It’s not like carbon where you can have isotopes with different numbers of neutrons, it just *is,* and can’t be broken into parts. The very basis of techniques is *transforming* chakra with elemental or yin or yang releases. How can pre-transformed chakra—the indivisible manifestation of pure energy—be different in different people? Is it possible that all techniques are actually doable by anyone, it’s just really freaking hard if you don’t have the right genetic hardware?”

With a start, Sakura realizes that she’s on her feet and has been walking in small circles for the last few minutes. The boys and sensei are staring at her, faces blank with shock, confusion, or dismay (you can probably guess which expression belongs to who).

“Sakura-chan,” Naruto says, tone uncharacteristically somber. “You’re so smart it’s *scary.”*

She flushes under the scrutiny. *“Anyway,”* Sakura flaps her hands compulsively. “Moral of the story is that if I had sharingan, I would be copying *everything.* Imagine what you could discover about the very nature of chakra itself, having so many techniques to study from the inside out!”

The presumptuousness of the declaration occurs to Sakura only after she’s said it, but neither Sasuke or Kakashi-sensei look chagrined. If anything, Sasuke appears thoughtful, like she might have given him an idea.

Then, a semi-awkward silence descends.

A heartbeat later, Kakashi-sensei claps his hands, dispelling the strange atmosphere.

“On that note, let’s wrap up the day with some sparring, hm?”

For quite possibly the first time in her life, Sakura finds herself excited at the prospect.

Ultimately, Sakura gets her butt handed to her by Naruto and Sasuke, but it’s less of a trouncing and more of a loss by way of endurance. Both of her spars with the boys end up as drawn-out dogfights, with Sakura’s speed and enhanced strength giving them equal trouble. Sakura only loses when she quite literally can’t put one more foot in front of the other.

(Yes, she’s aware that they could probably turn her into a smear if they went all out—but Sakura could also do some serious damage, if she went with the intent to kill. The thought is both comforting, and a little spooky.)

Kakashi-sensei decides to send them all home with a clone, despite no one being in particularly bad shape, and Pakkun’s comment all those weeks ago about him being a mother-hen starts to gain some real legitimacy.

Well, whatever. She needs to run some errands, and having a Clone-sensei around to help her carry stuff will be nice. With her parents home, they could probably do with some more basic necessities like toilet paper and whatnot in addition to the rice her mother asked her to pick up. Plus, she needs some new shuriken and a new whetstone for her kunai.

Maybe some protein bars for the mission, too, she thinks, and bids goodbye to her teammates.

Post-supermarket, Clone-sensei is relegated to packmule as Sakura browses the aisles of the weapons shop, his arms full of rice and toilet paper. “Yeesh,” she mutters, eyeing the price stickers. “When did shuriken get so expensive?”

Throwing literally her entire arsenal at Zabuza was maybe not the best choice, she muses. *Oh well.*

Annoyingly, the mini shopping spree is going to wipe out a decent chunk of Sakura’s cash, and she thumbs through the remaining bills in her wallet a little despondently. “Phew, this mission *is* good timing. I’m broke.”

Clone-sensei glances over from where he’s boredly looking through some katanas. “Your parents don’t pay for your supplies?”

Sakura looks at him strangely. “No, why would they?” she asks. “I mean, if I was like, completely desperate they’d loan me some cash, sure. But one of the agreements of my attending the Academy was that I would support my own career after making genin.”

Clone-sensei’s eyebrows climb even higher, and Sakura scrambles to defend her parents. “They still pay for food and stuff! They just want me to learn how to be independent and good with money,” she assures him. “I don’t pay rent so the genin stipend is more than enough for my supplies.”

Then Sakura thinks for a moment. “Well, at least before they got so damn expensive,” she amends. “Man, I hope Naruto is able to afford enough shuriken…”

“I help him out with things like that,” Clone-sensei says, to Sakura’s pleasant surprise.

“Oh, really? That’s good.”

“Mm. You know, the woman we’re delivering the letter to is actually the manager of the largest iron mill in eastern Fire,” Clone-sensei

says thoughtfully. “Maybe we can sneak in something about the price of weapons into the scroll…”

Sakura giggles at the idea. “Ooh, smart. Something like, *my dearest love, I have missed you more than I can say. I cannot wait to see you again. P.S. the shuriken economy has been rough lately. Fix that, maybe? Love, Yoshida.”*

Clone-sensei snorts with amusement at her shoddy imitation of a low baritone voice. “Flawless,” he deadpans. “She’ll never suspect a thing.”

After spending a small fortune on weapons, Clone-sensei and Sakura make their way to her house. Once there, Sakura earnestly thanks him for obliging her request for assistance, even if he’s a construct that will disappear from this plane of existence within minutes.

However, Clone-sensei doesn’t immediately *poof* away from Sakura’s doorstep when they arrive, instead beckoning her to wait. “Here, I do believe this belongs to you,” he says, and drops something into her waiting hands.

It’s…the strange gift from Zabuza!

“Wha—really?” Sakura gasps, clutching it to her chest. “I get to keep it?”

He shrugs. “Evidently, the one I gave them was of little real interest,” he responds, absentmindedly rubbing the side of his nose, which has Sakura blinking. *Did he just—?*

Did he just imply the one he gave to the hokage was fake?

Sakura squints at her teacher, but Kakashi-sensei’s gaze is placid, his expression guileless, and his body language lax. It gives nothing away.

“I see,” Sakura says slowly. “Well, thank you for returning it to me.”

He nods and offers a lazy salute, drawling, “Remember, bright and early tomorrow at the bridge. Ta!”

Then he’s gone in a swirl of leaves, not a poof. Which means that it wasn’t a Clone-sensei at all, and the real thing. Huh.

Sakura would feel more guilty about making her sensei run a bunch of errands, but he *did* get a free outfit upgrade. Worth probably hundreds of ryo, knowing the quality of shinobi gear her mother makes. A net gain, to be sure.

Haruno Kizashi and Mebuki are naturally a little disappointed to learn that Sakura is heading out again so soon, but perk up after learning of the location.

“Oh, perfect,” her mother says, clapping her hands together over the dinner table. “Your uncle Musashi was a generous host when we visited and we were going to mail him some good umeshu as thanks. But you can deliver it!”

Sakura nods. She likes Uncle Musashi, her father’s fraternal twin. Many a summer were spent digging through his radish fields, listening to cicadas sing in the trees. Before the Academy started, anyway. He would carry her on his shoulders when requested, and didn’t mind it when she bothered the goats and ate carrots straight from the dirt. Seeing him will be nice.

Packing for this mission is a bit easier than packing for Wave, and Sakura only has to take out a few unnecessary items before she deems her backpack ready for action. Uhei and Guruko (her guards for the night, apparently) show up halfway through and offer unhelpful but amusing commentary on the endeavor, and Sakura goes to bed with a smile on her face.

This mission is gonna be great, she thinks a little fuzzily and she snuggles down into her duvet, made infinitely more cozy by the

presence of two ninken. A C-rank mission will be a piece of cake for her team, who have grown so much in just the last month. *Shannaro.*

Sure enough, Team Seven's journey to northeastern Fire is almost absurdly leisurely.

They stop to train several times, taking advantage of ponds and creeks in order to facilitate water-walking practice. Sakura opts to focus on the sweat-induction part of her new technique, after realizing that she could risk severe dehydration if she used it carelessly. When not training or traveling, Sakura peruses the book she brought— *The Rich Histories of Signed Languages*— or pages through *Kuzushi no ri* for the thousandth time. Somehow, there's always something new to learn from it.

Watch is done in pairs, and Sakura is pleased as a peach when she's assigned to share her shift with Sasuke. They don't talk much —it would kind of defeat the purpose—but the silence they sit in is companionable. The conversations they do have are mostly signed, and almost entirely focused on training or chakra theory. He admits to her that he unlocked the second level of his Sharingan during Wave but hasn't copied much with it.

"I want to see what I can learn by copying many different techniques, like you mentioned," he signs with slim, deft fingers. The moonlight carves out his high cheekbones and smooth jaw in devastatingly high relief, and Sakura finds herself distracted by the beauty of it more than once.

"That's awesome," she signs back, trying to ignore the brief swell of jealousy that he even has the option. She really is quite happy that her words might have inspired him, even a little.

Sasuke's brow pinches, as if in thought, and then he hesitatingly signs, *"I could share it with you."*

Sakura's jaw drops a fraction, but she quickly schools the expression into something neutral.

"What I learn from it," he clarifies, the motions of his hands a bit more stiff. *"I could share it with you. You're good with chakra stuff."*

The fierce joy that bubbles up in Sakura's chest nearly overwhelms her. Her body tenses, electrified, as she willfully resists the urge to do something insane like hug him or do backflips in pure excitement. As it is, once the white-hot frisson of elation passes over her, she just nods and gives Sasuke the brightest grin she can muster.

"I'd love that," she signs. *"Thank you."*

The journey takes three days at their pace, though Kakashi-sensei says they'll make the return trip at a faster clip.

"You'll have mastered water-walking by then, won't you boys?" Kakashi-sensei says cheerfully as they make their way down the main road to Tetsugawa.

Tetsugawa is a mining town located just a few miles inward from the Fire-Iron border, territory won in the first shinobi war and critical to Konoha's weapon supply. The squat mountain range of Sōkōmushi-sanmyaku—which is really more like a winding series of rocky hills with big aspirations—is rich with iron and copper deposits, and supplies most of the raw materials used in steel production in all of Fire. The massive iron mill that sits at the very center of the town is by far and away its largest source of income.

It's a picturesque part of the country, with rolling hills of lush greenery, broken up by small clusters of wooded areas and quaint little farms. A creek runs alongside the road they walk on.

"So your uncle lives in Tetsugawa?" Naruto asks, trotting a little in order to catch up to Sakura as they plod along the dirt path. Wild spring onions and lavender fill the air with lively smells.

“Just outside of it,” Sakura corrects. “In a small farming village called Tsurui. The earth in this area is really rich with minerals from the mountains, so crops grow well.”

“This region is also known for its hot springs,” Kakashi-sensei interjects, and receives a chorus of *oohs* from his students. “Minerals in the water are said to have special rejuvenating properties.”

Sakura hums, nodding. She remembers hearing that too, though her family never paid them a visit. Too busy picking through radish hauls and submitting complaints to the Council about toxic runoffs from the mill polluting the rivers nearby. That issue was resolved a few years ago, however, after more stringent legislation about waste disposal was passed. The grassroots campaign had been spearheaded by her own uncle Musashi, with her father’s expertise in agricultural technology as the foundation for the new protocols.

The Sōkōmushi-sanmyaku mountains begin to modestly loom in the distance, and Sakura can see the telltale spirals of inky smoke rising in the distance, undoubtedly from the ever-burning forges.

“Sensei,” Sakura calls over her shoulder to where he’s walking a few paces behind. “My uncle’s village is that way. Can I drop off the stuff with my uncle now, or should we complete the mission first?”

Kakashi-sensei hums. “I don’t see why not.”

Sakura cringes a little. “Well, knowing my uncle, we’ll definitely be strong-armed into eating lunch.” *And maybe helping out with a few chores…*

Kakashi-sensei chuckles at that. “I can think of worse fates.”

The pink-haired genin shrugs. “Okay, then follow me!”

It’s only another twenty or so minute walk to Tsurui Village, and her uncle’s farm is thankfully one of the more southern lots. The familiar smell of tilled soil and fertilizer tingles in Sakura’s nostrils, and it’s

within moments that she spots the broad figure of her uncle out in one of his fields, a yoke hoisted over his shoulders with baskets dangling from either end.

“Uncle Musashi!” She calls, waving both arms above her head.

The man in question turns, one hand raised to tip back his wide wickerwork hat before he startles.

“Sprout?!” He cries, doing a double-take. “Goodness, kiddo! I didn’t know you were comin’!”

Sakura grins at the nickname, jogging up to the edge of the field, where her uncle meets her. He looks so much like her dad it’s almost weird, though his beard is fuller and his hair pulled back into a sensible half-ponytail, actually quite a bit like hers. It’s the same shade of dusky pink as Kizashi’s, and he has the same tan skin and winsome smile.

“No worries, I didn’t either,” she says cheerfully, rocking back and forth on her heels. “I’m here on a mission with my team to deliver a letter in Tetsugawa, but mama asked me to bring you something!”

Sakura tries to pull off her pack and dig out the bottle of umeshu but is prevented from doing so by her uncle sweeping her up into a hug. She leans into it happily, instinctively giving him a chakra-enhanced sniff. He smells healthy, and like soil and crushed leaves. It’s nice.

“Let me get a look at you!” He says, stepping back after releasing her. “Sage, it’s been what, two years? You’ve grown like a damn weed!”

Sakura grins, placing her hands on her hips proudly. “Not such a tiny Sprout anymore, huh?”

He drops a huge, calloused hand on her head. “I’d say you’ve graduated to seedling, sure,” he chuckles warmly.

Sakura bats it away, and this is when the rest of her team joins her at the edge of the field.

“Uncle, this is my team,” she begins. “Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke, and our sensei, Hatake Kakashi.”

Her uncle takes off his hat to offer them all a quick bow, and they do the same. Naruto almost falls flat on his face from the enthusiasm with which he bends.

“Wowza,” Uncle Musashi breathes, plopping the wickerwork hat back on his head. “Your folks said you had a pretty impressive team, but… wow. A Hatake, Uchiha, *and* an Uzumaki? It’s very nice to meet you all!”

“You’ve met me, pops?” Naruto says, confusion evident in his voice. There’s a thread of nervousness in his scent, too.

“I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure,” her uncle says with an apologetic smile. “But I’m plenty familiar with the Uzumaki clan. Heck, I’m pretty sure this one’s got an Uzumaki great-grandma somewhere on her mother’s side.” He directs this second thought at Sakura.

Naruto’s jaw collects dirt for a few seconds from where it rests on the ground, before he cries, *“Clan?!”*

Uncle Musashi blinks at the incredulous tone. “Well, sure! The Uzumaki clan has been around since the Founding.”

It’s Sakura’s turn to make a shocked noise. “Wait, really?”

“That is the Uzumaki clan symbol,” her uncle says, pointing to the red swirl on Naruto’s shoulder, before his tone becomes confused. “Did they really not teach you during your schooling?”

“They do tend to focus a bit more on the physical practicum these days,” her teacher points out dryly.

Sakura eyes him and makes a mental note to interrogate him later. *There's no way he didn't know that, so why…?*

Well, whatever. "When did you become a history buff on Konoha?" Sakura wonders, head tipping to one side.

"Your dad and I grew up there," he shrugs. "Before I was a farmer, I worked as a clerk in the Civilian Legislation Office. Having a decent grasp on history was part of the gig." Then he strokes his beard thoughtfully and says, "Think I worked there for five, maybe six years? Took off for the country when you were nary but a twinkle in your father's eye."

Well, Sakura is learning all sorts of things today, isn't she? First that Naruto had (has?) a clan, one that *she might be related to,* and now that her hick farmer uncle was a *law clerk?* What the hell?

"But enough about me," Uncle Musashi declares. "Could I trouble you all into joining me for lunch? I just caught some fresh trout this morning." Then, his expression becomes shrewd. "There is also a bookshelf I could use some help moving…"

Sakura just turns to Kakashi-sensei and raises her brows to say, *told ya.*

Lunch is, of course, delicious.

Sakura gets immediately conscripted into helping, though she doesn't mind it. Mainly because her uncle puts the boys to work right away, too.

"Would you mind cleaning these?" her uncle asks as he sets a woven basket of trout down in front of where Kakashi-sensei sits on the timber-floored veranda of the farmhouse.

"Of course," her sensei answers, already peeling off his gloves.

“Naruto, you should watch him,” Sakura tells her teammate as she ties back the sleeves of her haori with a sash, her armguards tossed in a pile with her pack. “Learning how to clean a fish is an important cooking skill!”

Naruto salutes and pulls out his little notebook, then follows Kakashi-sensei outside.

Sasuke chops vegetables while Sakura tends to the sunken hearth, hanging up a kettle filled with rice and herbs over the coals. They eat grilled fish, quick-pickled vegetables, and rice, all of it ridiculously fresh and tasty. Naruto is so effusive with his praise that Uncle Musashi actually blushes a little, and offers to give Naruto cooking lessons whenever he visits.

All in all, it’s a terribly relaxing afternoon.

Especially compared to Wave, Sakura muses. That mission started out with a jerk of a client and ended with Sasuke almost dead and Sakura half-deaf in one ear. Now here she is, having a leisurely lunch with her team and uncle in the idyllic Fire countryside. They’ll drop off the scroll, thus doing their part to keep true love alive, and then make their merry back to Konoha and be paid a handsome sum for it.

Easy peasy, she hums in her head. This mission will be a cinch.

“To Kimura Nobuko, you say?” Uncle Musashi says after they explain why they’re out in northeastern Fire, setting his empty rice bowl down. “Well, how much to add my own scroll to the pile? Because I’ve got some things I wouldn’t mind saying to her, too.”

Sakura blinks, shocked at the sudden bitterness in her uncle’s voice. “Why’s that, Uncle?”

“You remember years ago, when your dad and I worked to get laws passed regarding pollution from the iron mill?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, ever since the son of the previous owner of the mill took over a couple months ago, they’ve been flagrantly violating those rules, dumping waste wherever they see fit,” he explains, arms crossed over his chest. “Kimura-san is still the manager, and she’s just letting all of this happen. Disgraceful, truly.”

“That’s awful!” Sakura cries, remembering the shriveled plants and rotting animal corpses that resulted from the pollution back then. “Will your farm be alright?”

Her uncle sighs. “Perhaps. Your dad advised me to pay a shinobi to write up some seals around my well to cleanse the water. It’s been helpful so far, but I’m not sure how long it will last.”

“May I take a look at it?” Kakashi-sensei interjects. “I’m not a seals expert, but my master was, and I picked up a thing or two.”

“Sure,” her Uncle Musashi agrees easily. “That’s kind of you.”

After sensei touches up the seals in Uncle Musashi’s well, the four members of Team Seven head out to Tetsugawa to complete their mission. Her uncle sends them off with a bushel of radishes and the offer of dinner and a place to crash if they opt to stay the night in the area.

“I like your uncle, Sakura-chan!” Naruto says as they begin their journey north. “He said I can come by any time and learn more cooking!”

Sakura smiles at him. “So I heard.” Then the smile becomes a little devious. *“Cousin.”*

Naruto flails, almost stumbling over his feet. “C-cuh- *cousin?”*

Sakura giggles at his shocked face and the sudden flush on his cheeks. “Sure! My uncle said we might be distantly related, after all.

Maybe I'll call you *Cuz* for short."

Naruto stares at her wide-eyed for a few more seconds, expression inscrutable. Sakura feels a prickle of anxiety, wondering if she'd maybe gone too far somehow…? He is an orphan, after all. Maybe what she said was insensitive. Or was it his crush? Not that he'd acted like he was crushing on her anymore recently, anyway, but—

"You'd really want me?" he says, voice tiny. "As a cousin?"

Sakura blinks before giving him the sunniest grin she can muster. "No doubt!" Sakura chirps, before her face adopts a serious expression. "Although, you know…"

He becomes nervous, fingers curling around his backpack straps more tightly. "Know what…?"

Sakura sighs. "As your cousin, I am legally required to give you a noogie at least once a day," she declares somberly.

"Wh-what? Sakura-chan, wait—"

But Sakura is already shaking her head, a sympathetic grimace on her face as she turns and begins to advance on him. "Sorry, Cuz. Them's the breaks."

Then she lunges.

"No, thank you. I do not want to see the letter. Please leave."

Kimura Nobuko.

Kimura Nobuko is a beast of a woman, and Sakura means that in the most admiring way possible.

She's short, at a height with Naruto, but broad-shouldered and stocky. Her brown hair is cut short, barely reaching her chin, and she's dressed in a simple loose tunic and linen pants, a clipboard

clamped under one arm and the other akimbo. She's pretty, in the same way a panther or crashing waterfall is pretty. Dangerous, and strong.

She's also currently telling Team Seven to go pound sand.

"Er, Kimura-san," Kakashi-sensei tries, hands raised as if to placate a startled animal. "We're delivering this letter on behalf of Yoshida-sama, and—"

Kimura-san's expression becomes pinched. "Didn't you hear me?" she snaps, wiping her nose angrily. "I said I don't want to see it."

Sakura rocks anxiously on her heels. *Maybe they had a falling out? Or maybe this Yoshida guy is actually a total creep?*

Kakashi-sensei deflates, clearly not willing to force an unwanted romantic letter on the woman. "Yes, alright," he sighs. "Sorry, Kimura-san, we'll be on our way—"

"Tell him," Kimura-san cuts him off, then scrubs a hand over her nose again. "Tell Yuu—I mean Yoshida, that I don't want to hear from him again."

Sakura perks up at the near-use of the man's first name, and the way her voice almost, *almost* catches on it. *Aw man, he must have broken her heart.*

Sakura steps forward, compelled by the woman's obvious pain. "We'll make sure he gets the message, Kimura-san. Loud and clear."

But to her shock, the words don't seem to placate Kimura-san, and rather there's a lightning-quick flash of something—regret? Remorse?—over her face before it's schooled back into anger.

"G-good." Kimura-san wipes her nose again, and Sakura starts to wonder if she's got allergies or something because she's not actually crying, for all of her distress, but—

Wait.

Something about the motion tickles something in the back of Sakura's mind, a couple of alarm bells going off very faintly. The quiet ringing—tinnitus, Kondo-san had called it—in her left ear gets louder, as it sometimes does when her heartbeat picks up.

Alarm bells. Ringing. Tinnitus. Something else. What is it? ***What is it?***

She's on the precipice of putting something together, the feeling right before her brain finishes sifting through its millions of folders of memorized information and goes *ding! Here you go!*

Impulsively, Sakura blurts, "He must have been a real jerk, Kimura-san. I'm sorry."

Kimura-san studies her for a second, before she nods. Another nose rub, as if it's a compulsion. "Y-yeah, he really was." Another. "The worst." *Another.*

Tinnitus. Ringing. Armor rings, when you hit it.

"I hate him." *Another. Is it a tic?*

Sakura is aware she's probably staring like a crazy person, but she can't help it. Something isn't right. A genjutsu? No, Kakashi-sensei would have dispelled it.

Ringing, ringing. Armor. Sōkōmushi-sanmyaku, the armored worm mountains. Annexed from Iron. Rice was annexed too. Kimura-san immigrated from Rice, didn't she?

It's like being hit by a bolt of lightning, when Sakura finally makes sense of what her brain is trying to tell her.

Looking closely, Kimura-san isn’t really wiping her nose, more like pinching it and pulling down at once. A swift movement, almost a swipe. Sakura has seen it—well, a drawing of it.

Once, in the book she brought. *The Rich Histories of Signed Languages.*

No, Kimura-san doesn’t have a tic, nor does she have allergies.

Sakura is certain, more certain than she’s ever been about anything, that the gesture is ancient Rice sign-language. A rough version of it, anyway, concealed within Kimura-san’s other erratic movements and her palpable agitation.

What was it Sakura’s book said…?

Though it is not authoritatively known, the origin of this sign is thought to have come from the concept of hokkamuri: a bandana tied underneath the nose as a way of indicating that someone (usually within a fictional context) is a thief or ne'er-do-well. Indeed, the swiping-pinching motion of this sign could be considered an evocation of this imagery. This sign has a somewhat broad application, and is used to indicate thievery, falsehood, trickery, or in some cases—

Sakura’s heart thuds.

—that the speaker is telling a lie.

---

oooooooop we got PLOT COMIN'. sakura's odd, varied, and broad interests/fixations are coming to fruition. like i said, weird little girls will save the world :)

also, i cannot begin to tell you how much i agonized over referring to kakashi's jacket as a "bomber" jacket, given that's a term related to airplanes, and thus shouldn't exist in the naruto world. i know that

kind of thing can ruin the immersion, but trying to describe one sensibly was worse, IMO. forgive me!

next time: things get hairy in Tetsugawa, and Sakura begins to find out what it really means to be a hero.

Seeds of change

Chapter 12: Seeds of change

---

hi! back with almost 10k words of imperiling my favorite team. this chapter was a beast, and i'm glad i finally got it in good enough shape to post.

i also went back and edited some earlier chapters to decrease sakura's potty mouth. i had her swearing like a sailor even tho she's only 12 and a recovering goody-two-shoes, which i think didn't fit quite right. plus, i think it's way funnier when she's in a literal life or death situation and is like "oh FRICK!" lmao

thank you, thank you, thank you as always for being the best readers in the world. truly, sakura stans are the actual best.

check out the note at the end of the chapter for a shamelessly thirsty RRD kakashi doodle by yours truly :)

enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Well, crap, Sakura despairs. *I don’t know any other Rice Sign Language.*

Her mind races as an awkward silence draws out, and the boys begin to shuffle towards the door, clearly wanting this interaction to end. Thankfully, Kakashi-sensei stays put, his gaze on Sakura. Hopefully he’s sensed that there’s something wrong here, too.

Sakura quickly surveys the otherwise average-looking office. It’s nice, with solid wood appointments and a lot of plants and natural light. There’s no one else in the room and the door is closed, but it

seems like Kimura-san doesn't feel like she can speak freely. *Maybe it's bugged? By who?!*

Sakura's only option is to use Fire Sign Language and hope that Kimura-san understands it.

She steps forward, right hand resting over her heart. "I promise you he'll never bother you again," Sakura says, using that same hand to lightly chop the palm of the other. The motion, to someone unfamiliar, might appear as merely an emotional gesture.

The origin of this sign she just performed, like most, isn't official. That's one of the things Sakura loves about the language, actually. Fire Sign Language isn't a direct translation of any spoken language, it's a different one entirely. In a way, she can carve out her own meaning in each gesture; the picture she paints with her hands is shaped by concepts that resonate.

In this case, Sakura views the sign as saying, *I put my heart on the floor before you.*

Or as her FSL guidebook would define it: *truth.*

Kimura-san's eyes widen a fraction, her brows pinching, before her expression is schooled into one of polite neutrality. Then, the briefest touch of two fingers to her forehead. It could be her wiping away sweat, but Sakura is pretty sure Kimura-san just signed, *I understand.*

"Thank you, shinobi-san. I appreciate—"

The rest of her response is cut off by the door opening, and all five heads swivel to take in the newcomer.

A man in his thirties, maybe forties. He's vaguely handsome in a boring way, dark hair and almond-shaped eyes. Tall and broad without being imposing. His clothing is neat and simple, with nary a

crease or smudge to be seen. A quick sniff of his scent only informs Sakura that he uses herbal soap and aftershave.

For all intents and purposes, he doesn't seem like he should be a threat. Sakura's hackles rise anyway.

"What's all this, Nobuko?" He asks, eyes roving over Sakura's team, guarded interest in his voice.

Kimura-san doesn't react, not *really,* but there's something about the infinitesimally small way she hesitates, her shoulders tensing just slightly, that sets off alarm bells in Sakura's head.

Crap, I can't lie. If the room really is bugged, whoever is listening will know what they were talking about. And this guy has got to be involved, she's certain of it.

Going with her gut, Sakura loudly answers, "We were originally here to deliver a letter to Kimura-san, but I'd also like to talk about pollution and waste management."

His eyebrows raise, betraying true curiosity. "A letter?" Then he looks at Kimura-san. "Not from that simpering royal, I hope."

The comment sets off even *more* alarms in Sakura's mind. This person is aware of Yoshida-sama, *and* his romantic relationship with Kimura-san…enough to be privy to details and hold some kind of opinion on his character. He's also clearly Kimura-san's superior, from the way she bows her head in deference. Could this be the new mill owner her uncle had mentioned?

"We are indeed here on behalf of his lordship, Yoshida-sama," Kakashi-sensei interjects. "But Kimura-san has made it clear she has no desire to communicate with him, so we will destroy the letter and return to Konoha."

The answer seems to satisfy something in the man, and a small smirk curls his lips. "Good to hear," he nods. "This mill would be

devastated to be deprived of Nobuko. We'd be lost without her."

Kimura-san's answering smile is demure, and tight at the edges.

"Back on the subject of pollution," Sakura pipes up, determined to look like a meddler rather than a co-conspirator. "There have been reports of flagrant disregard for proper waste disposal protocols, including but not limited to dumping slag in unpermitted areas, disposal of waste-waster into the local aquaphor, and the usage of an unreported pressure valve to vent coal oven gas when your smokestack battery exceeded emissions limits."

(Internally, the genin has never been so glad to have been subjected to many lectures on proper environmental precautions by her father. *Thank you, papa!*)

The man blinks at Sakura, and to her extreme relief, all traces of suspicion vanish from his expression, replaced instead by annoyance.

"We're aware of the allegations and are investigating," Kimura-san cuts in instantly, seeming to pick up on Sakura's angle. *Or maybe she's actually party to the crimes…?* Either way, not the priority right now.

"Nobuko is correct," he agrees with a nod, walking over to stand next to Kimura-san. "I assure you, we are fully committed to responsible management of waste and the protection of the environment."

Then he turns to Sakura and asks, "May I inquire as to why you four are so concerned with this?" He points to his forehead, presumably indicating their hitai-ate. The unsaid: *because you are awfully far from home.*

Sakura's eyes narrow at the man's *just-barely-too-close-to-be-professional* proximity to Kimura-san. "My uncle lives in Tsurui."

The man blinks; moves away from Kimura-san, instead walking up to Sakura. Abruptly, the genin regrets stepping away from her team, wishing she could fortify her nerves with their proximity. Something about this man makes her skin crawl.

He looms over Sakura, appraising her. His gaze catches on her hair. “A Haruno?”

She bares her teeth at him. “Proudly so.”

“Musashi must be your uncle, then?” he murmurs, though it doesn’t seem like he’s really asking for confirmation. “Such courage, sending his little niece instead of coming here himself.”

“He didn’t send me, I decided to come here on my own.”

The man hums. “I suppose that’s not surprising. You come from a long line of busybodies. Now, tell me something…”

Sakura frowns. “What?”

“You are not operating on behalf of the council, environmental magistrate, or any other official body.”

“No—"

“I must surmise, therefore, that you are not in possession of any evidence with which you could back up these claims.”

“No, but—"

“Then this is *not* delivery of a notice of violation or intention to investigate—which is to say, anything that could give you legal providence to make such allegations—and merely the behavior of an impulsive child, no doubt one who has labored under the misapprehension that being precocious somehow redeems her irreparable rudeness. ”

Sakura flinches back. *Ouch, okay this cover story is getting a little real.*

Before she can respond, however, Kakashi-sensei suddenly appears between them. The movement is so quick that it's like he's been there the whole time, betrayed only by the slightest breeze.

"I'd be grateful if you refrained from attempting to intimidate my students," he says, hands in his pockets, the very picture of nonchalance. Her teacher's superior height and broadness becomes apparent as he towers over the brown-haired man, even while slouching.

Wisely, the man retreats, yielding space to Kakashi-sensei. Through a curled lip, he says, "And I would be grateful if your students did not waste the time of my staff with baseless accusations."

Kakashi-sensei shrugs, the slow roll of his shoulders like that of a panther lazing in the sun. "Genin," he drawls. "What can you do?"

"I presumed that as her commander, you would perhaps discourage the abuse of protocol and taking advantage of a mission to air her own personal grievances."

"Well, we do encourage independence in our young shinobi," Kakashi-sensei returns easily, his eyes curving into playful crescents.

"I see," the man mutters, distaste apparent in his tone. "If you do not have any other *legitimate* business, I must ask you to leave so we may return to our work."

Kakashi-sensei's head tilts to one side, as if in thought. "Actually, any sight-seeing recommendations? Our mission is effectively canceled, so we might as well play tourist for the day."

The brown-haired man snorts, before briskly turning and heading for the door. He pauses after opening it, head inclining towards Kimura-

san.

“Nobuko,” he murmurs. “Get those expenditure reports on my desk by the end of the day, please.”

Kimura-san nods. “Yes, Oyakata-sama.”

Then he’s gone, and it’s just the five of them once more.

“I’ll escort you out,” Kimura-san says quietly, gesturing at her office door.

And without further ado, Team Seven is summarily whisked off of the premises. Sakura tries her best to gather any useful observations on their way out, but the five seconds of eyes she manages to lay on the actual workings of the mill is far from illuminating. *Dang.*

However, before Kimura-san allows the large iron doors to the main building to fully close behind her, she pauses.

“If you’re staying in town…I don’t have any recommendations, but you should avoid Oni-no-Senmenki onsen. It’s a zoo, especially in the evenings.”

Kimura-san locks eyes with Sakura, rubbing her nose as she passes along this advice.

The devil’s washbasin? Sakura turns the name around in her head. Somehow, she thinks it’s going to be fitting.

Then, the doors slam shut.

Naruto is the first to speak, clearly fed up with the weird atmosphere. “Sakura-chan, what the *heck* was—"

“I want to get a gift for Ino while I’m here,” Sakura cuts him off, turning pleading eyes onto her teacher. “Sensei, can we go back to Tsurui? I think I know where I can buy some rare seeds.”

The complete non-sequitur earns Sakura three blank stares, but thankfully her teacher is pretty sharp. And the urgency in Sakura's voice probably helps her case a bit.

"Sure," he agrees easily. "Should we let your uncle know we'll be coming back?"

The courtesy hadn't even crossed her mind, but, "Yes, that's probably a good idea."

Kakashi-sensei sends a clone ahead to let Uncle Musashi know they're returning, while her team makes their way out of town at a more sedate pace. Sakura has to force herself not to be jittery, fisting her hands to keep from picking at her nails and counting her steps per minute to keep them from ratcheting up into a nervous jog.

Sasuke and Naruto continue to give her weird looks but it's not until they're fully out of Tetsugawa proper and on the way back to Tsurui that Sakura is able to draw a deep breath.

"Would you like to explain what happened back there?" Kakashi-sensei asks, tipping his head at her curiously as they walk.

Sakura hesitates. They're away from the town, but who knows how far that creepy guy's reach goes. "Um."

"If you're concerned about something overhearing us, I've just activated a silencing seal. No one outside of a twenty foot radius will be able to hear what we're saying, and I've set up a mild illusion as well."

When did he—whatever, not the time. Sakura is just grateful her sensei is so clever.

"Kimura-san was lying when she said she didn't want the letter," Sakura says, earning two noises of surprise from the boys, and a nod from her teacher.

“I suspected that,” Kakashi-sensei allows. “But how can you be sure?”

“Remember how she kept grabbing and kinda rubbing her nose?” Sakura mimics the motion. “It’s a hand-sign, old Rice Sign Language. I recognized it from that book I've been reading. It can mean thief, trickery, that sort of thing, and also that the speaker is lying.”

“Whoa,” Sasuke mutters in a rare moment of being openly impressed. Sakura is too focused on recounting the event to truly appreciate it.

“I don’t know any other RSL, so I signed *truth* in Fire Sign Language and she touched her head, like *I understand.* Sensei, there’s something fishy going on, and I think it had to do with that brown-haired guy. He’s gotta be the new mill owner, right? She called him boss.”

Kakashi-sensei digests the onslaught of words for a moment. “I have to agree with you, Sakura-chan.”

“He even knew about Yoshida-sama,” Sakura continues. “That’s *extremely* personal information for her boss to have, not to mention the way he spoke about it!”

“Maybe he’s her new boyfriend?” Naruto wonders, arms crossed in thought.

“She seemed pretty uncomfortable around him,” Sasuke points out. “Scared, even.”

Sakura nods, gratified that Sasuke picked up on Kimura-san’s discomfort too. “I don’t know if it has to do with the pollution stuff or if this is an entirely different issue, but there’s definitely something going on. Sensei, please let me meet her at the onsen tonight!”

Kakashi-sensei hesitates. “Er—"

“She made the *lying* sign again when she talked about that onsen,” Sakura insists. “She must have meant we should go there, but didn’t want to actually say it where that man could hear it.”

Her teacher sighs, looking uncertain. “Sakura-chan, I’m not sure if that’s the best idea.”

“Last time our mission suddenly got weird and difficult, you were fine with us carrying on,” she says, although given the outcome of *that* mission, maybe it’s not her best bargaining tactic. “It’s a public onsen, and you guys can be in the men’s bath, just a bamboo wall away. I’ll see if I can rendezvous with her and get more information. Maybe Kimura-san has a way to ensure we’re not being spied on there.”

Kakashi-sensei’s expression becomes moderately more considering. “I suppose there probably are more anti-spying precautions in place at an onsen like that,” he admits.

“Yeah, I mean most bath entryways are fitted with seals that automatically dispel illusions and transformation techniques,” Sakura says. When she gets some blank stares in response, she adds, “Or, uh, maybe it’s just the women’s baths…?”

Kind of a depressing thought, Sakura thinks, *but misogyny and the prevalence of peeping toms in male shinobi is not the issue, right now!*

“Well, what do you two think?” Kakashi-sensei asks, turning his attention to Naruto and Sasuke.

“I wanna know what’s going on!” Naruto answers immediately. “Plus, Sakura-chan’s way smart. If anyone can figure this out, it’s her!”

Sakura smiles at the faith her teammate has in her.

“I want to know, too,” Sasuke says quietly. “And Naruto’s right, between her eidetic memory and the contextual knowledge from

visiting as a child, she's well-suited to the task."

Sakura gawks openly at the frank praise, only remembering to shut her mouth when Sasuke looks at her strangely. Has he ever said anything so nice to her, ever?

Kakashi-sensei heaves out a heavy sigh. "Fine," he mutters. "But you're taking Pakkun."

After much back and forth ("Sakura, he's a *dog."* "Sensei, he's still a *boy* dog!") Sakura ends up in the women's bath of the Oni-no-Senmenki onsen, naked but for a towel, and completely alone. Except for the grumpy pug.

"You're not allowed to talk while we're in here," Sakura mutters to him through clenched teeth, sinking lower in the murky water. "You'll freak someone out."

Pakkun pointedly roves his gaze over the very empty bath, before giving her a supremely disdainful side-eye. "Woof."

The delightfully hot water does a decent job of soothing Sakura's nerves, but she can't help but glance around anxiously anyway. It's a small, understated bathhouse, though elegant in its natural simplicity: stone and wood structures, lit by paper lanterns. The water is cloudy from the minerals and smells richly of earth and herbs.

For several long minutes, it's dreadfully quiet. The steam rising off of the water is so thick it—

Wait, *steam!*

Attention fully sidetracked, Sakura brings one hand to the surface of the water, the back of her hand remaining submerged while the palm is just barely beneath the surface, like she's touching a pane of

glass. She focuses chakra into her palm, trying to get a feel for the natural energy,

Having mastered water walking, it's not too hard to align her chakra with the ebb and flow of the water, but that's not really her ultimate goal here. Sakura closes her eyes and tries to focus on the water at the surface, the way its energy changes as it evaporates into steam. If her understanding of thermodynamics is correct, the molecules of water are vibrating extremely rapidly due to the heat energy, enough so that the intermolecular bonds break, allowing them to escape into the atmosphere. If she *really* focuses—

Whoa! The sudden tingling in the palm of her hand makes Sakura jerk, the pins-and-needles somehow both ticklish and stinging. It's like…the sound of static made into sensation, bubbling, *sparking,* the vibration of a billion microscopic glass beads rattling. The feeling brings forth the memory of holding a sparkler, the way the embers chitter and leap like tiny, blazing insects. It's *so* odd.

And somehow, it makes perfect sense.

She lets the sensation wash over her, carving it deep into her memory. The chaos of it, the way it stirs up her chakra, makes Sakura giggle, as if her very soul is being tickled.

Generating this much energy on her own—enough to evaporate a large amount of water—would be difficult, even deadly if she tried… but if the heat were supplied by an outside source (say, a fireball technique), Sakura is moderately confident she could sequester it into water and then turn that into steam.

Before she can think better of it, Sakura lifts her hand out of the water, and centers her chakra into her palm where a small pool of water remains. The pool literally *wriggles* in her hand (which is bizarre and delightful to watch) before it erupts into a cloud of steam with a muted *pomf!*

The concentrated blast of hot vapor has Sakura jerking back, her cheeks stinging a bit, and the sound of splashing echoes through the deserted bath. Sakura only has another moment to ponder both the apparent unpopularity of this onsen and the fact that she really is a chakra-control genius, when—

—all hell breaks loose.

Okay, not *really,* but abruptly the once peaceful atmosphere is shattered by the noise of approaching raucousness. There is suddenly a very large number of people approaching the bath.

Sakura freezes, terrified, but Pakkun is still dozing on the edge of the bath (and yes, she's completely shocked they allowed her to bring him in at all, she's pretty sure sensei made up some nonsense about him being a service dog) so they must not be dangerous…right?

Sure enough, a few moments later, a veritable sea of women comes tromping out of the entryway, all in various states of nudity and dampness from the requisite pre-hotspring showers. Sakura shrinks into the water, observing, as bodies pile into the bath. It's at least a dozen, maybe more.

"Phew," sighs one, her long gray hair swept up into a messy bun. She slides into the bath with a splash. "I'm fuckin' *beat.* That was a long day."

"I'll say," agrees another, completely naked and obviously unbothered about it. Her impressive bosom is on full display as she reclines against the edge of the hot spring, elbows resting on the rocks. Her shoulders are broad, her hands large and scarred. Her eyes are beautiful, her jaw handsome.

Sakura feels her face flush, and it's not entirely out of envy.

"Kimura, you really cracked the whip today," pipes up a third, who is now floating belly-up like an otter. "Is Kenchirin-chan givin' you shit again?"

Sakura startles at the name of her target, but thankfully the noise of her flailing in the water is fully lost in the cheerful clamor of the women around her.

“Abe-san continues to be his usual meticulous self,” is the diplomatic answer that comes, and Sakura has to crane her neck to see the woman around the small crowd.

Sure enough, Kimura-san is making her way through the water, towards the less-occupied end (which is to say, Sakura’s end). A towel is wrapped modestly around her torso.

Throwing caution to the wind, Sakura pops up slightly out of the water and offers a wave to the woman. “Kimura-san!” She greets, making sure to color her tone heavily with pleased surprise. “I didn’t expect to see you here!”

A myriad of micro-expressions rapidly cycle over Kimura-san’s face, ultimately landing on neutral, mild shock. But the way her shoulders drop a hair, the tiniest sign of relief, of *hope…* it fully solidifies the remainder of Sakura's resolve.

She’s going to figure out what’s going on, and save Kimura-san!

“Haruno-san,” she responds with a nod. “Same to you. I tried to warn you about the—"

As if on cue, one of the recent denizens jumps into the water with a cacophonous splash, soaking the two of them. It’s disruptive, but an excellent cover for Kimura to move closer to Sakura.

Sakura waves the thought away. “Nah, I’m on a team with two boys my age. I’m used to noise.” And her left ear makes it really easy to tune them out, anyway…

“Understandable.” Kimura-san sits down next to Sakura, their shoulders near enough to almost brush. “Is this your dog?”

Whoops, probably should have paid closer attention to Kakashi-sensei's cover story. "Yeah," Sakura answers, flailing internally. "He helps me, uh, navigate places where I'm discouraged from using chakra. I'm partially deaf in my left ear."

Understanding crosses Kimura's face in a bolt, as if puzzle pieces are clicking together. Then, completely startling the crap out of Sakura, the woman's hands find her own in the water, grasping them tightly.

"It's nice that you have him," she says lightly. Meanwhile, her fingers begin to move around Sakura's rapidly, forming shapes with them. It takes a few moments of dumb, vacant staring before the genin realizes what's happening.

Signs. They're *signs.* Kimura-san is using Sakura's hands to form Fire Sign Language, completely out of view beneath the surface of the hot spring.

And they say: *are you fluent?*

"So, how do you like being a shinobi, Haruno-san?" Kimura says with her mouth while her hands, hidden in the murky water, once again ask, *"Are you fluent?"*

"Um, it's hard, but rewarding." Now she takes Oba-san's hands into her own. *"Yes, I am."*

"You mentioned your teammates, do you enjoy working with them?" *"Can you help me?"*

"Yes," Sakura answers both questions at once, squeezing Kimura's hands tightly in her own. "Are these other women your… colleagues?" Clumsily, her hands say, *"Tell me everything you can, quickly."*

"Yes," Kimura-san answers with a wry smile. "Mostly they're laborers: welders, boilermakers, smiths, though some are foremen too."

“I was lying when I said I didn’t want to read the letter from Yuu. I love him.”

Sakura’s heart skips a beat when her hands are folded into the tight, grasping sign for *love.*

Verbally, Kimura-san details some additional job titles—cinderman, batch pickler, millwright—which are of vague interest to sakura, but it gives the woman time to speak more at length with her hands.

“Years ago, long before he inherited the mill, Abe Kennichi and I were romantically involved. He was so sweet to me at first, he made me feel like the most important person in the world. But eventually he became…unkind.”

A frisson of fear runs up Sakura’s spine. Unkind? What can that possibly mean? Was he abusive? *Violent?*

Instead of voicing any of that, Sakura says, “How did you end up managing the mill, Kimura-san?” With her hands, she encourages the woman to keep explaining.

“I used to work at a dive bar called *Rabbit’s Foot,* worked my way up from bar-back to general manager over a few years. The previous owner of the mill came in one day and was impressed by how organized everything was.”

“Kennichi and I were off and on for a while before I met Yuu about a year ago. I had no idea what love was until I met him.”

Sakura nods, a response to both lines of thought.

“Abe-oji-sama said I ran the place tighter than some militias and asked if I wanted to come and manage the mill instead. I was hesitant, but the pay was too good to pass up,” Kimura-san explains, her hands moving deftly under the water as she speaks.

“Kennichi was furious, but obviously powerless against someone of Yuu’s status. Until he inherited the mill.”

The dual conversation continues, and Sakura’s head practically spins as she tries to keep up with the two entirely different trains of thought simultaneously. Not to mention actually supplying her own end!

She learns that after Abe Kennichi took control of Konoha’s largest iron supplier, he wasted no time in using his new status to line his pockets and grow his power and influence in other fields. He started with massive layoffs in the mill, causing staffing shortages. A bigger profit margin for him, and it kept the mill in a constant state of minor (or major) chaos.

Of course, Kennichi has shielded all of this from the personnel other than Kimura-san, instead citing heavier restrictions and taxation from the Council as the reasoning for tightening their belt…and no one has the time or energy to snoop and find out otherwise.

Indeed, Kennichi’s newest venture is opium, as he fancies himself some kind of mob-boss. Mercenaries and thugs were added to the payroll...literally. Kimura-san found herself signing paystubs and arranging benefits for new employees whose job titles consisted of things like *Conflict Resolution Specialist* and *Financial Compliance Officer,* and other vaguely menacing but semi-legitimate titles.

Kimura-san resisted at first, and fully intended to quit and return to Yuu’s side, but…

“He threatened to burn down the mill with everyone still inside,” Kimura-san signs with a drawn look on her face. *“And that’s not an idle threat. Kennichi can be extremely violent.”*

Not to mention that the illegal drug trade was probably offering plenty of financial security, so the man could afford the loss. In fact, he could probably reap a decent insurance payout, and then rebuild,

charging even higher prices. It's not like the iron ore deposits in the mountains were going anywhere.

So the price-jacking and ecological damage is a symptom, not a cause, Sakura deduces internally. It occurs to her suddenly, that this situation has ballooned far past anything she had anticipated in terms of both scale and danger.

Not that it matters, though, because Sakura is committed to seeing this through.

"He's been monitoring my communications, so I haven't been able to contact anyone," Kimura-san explains silently, while she verbally questions Sakura about being on a team of all boys.

Sakura wonders briefly how on earth this has all managed to happen under Konoha's nose, but …then again, Gato had been operating on their border for a long time, presumably with contacts within Fire country as well. Additionally, she remembers that as part of the annexation treaty with Iron, Konoha agreed to limit their presence near the border.

Heck, *technically* Konoha's real jurisdiction ends just a few clicks beyond the city's walls. In peace-time, borders are to be maintained and chaperoned by civilian officers that answer directly to the Daimyo and the Capitol, with no in-between of the Hidden Villages. Konoha-operated patrol stations are few and far in between…though she's certain there are secret operatives scattered all over.

It's the gesture that counts or whatever. *Politics.*

More importantly, how the heck are they going to get Kimura-san out of here? The current theatrics are enough to keep Sakura and her team from being outright attacked (she assumes, anyway) but Sakura would bet her copy of *Kuzushi no ri* that the moment they leave this city, Kennichi will retaliate against Kimura-san. Beyond the threat of her exposing his illegal activities, he's clearly obsessed with her.

Whether that means blackmail or kidnapping or full-on murder, Sakura doesn't know, but she's not interested in finding out.

"…Haruno-san?"

Sakura blinks, realizing she's been sitting in silence, staring blankly at Kimura-san as she turns this all over in her mind.

"Sorry, what were you saying?" Sakura laughs sheepishly. "I spaced out. I'm a little tired."

"No problem, I understand. I was just asking if you'll be staying in town, tonight."

"Oh, we're staying with my uncle, actually," Sakura answers, forgetting for a moment that she maybe should have fudged that.

Way to give up your position, genius, she berates herself internally.

"He lives in Tsurui, right?" Kimura-san asks, and smiles when Sakura nods in response. "It's a beautiful town. My friend Saoko lives there. I'm actually staying with her tonight."

"Kennichi has my home surveilled twenty-four seven."

Sakura digests that for a moment, the quiet horror of it all. Every moment of Kimura-san's life…every step outside, every inane conversation with a supermarket clerk or trip to the post office or taking out the trash, even every bite of food is dogged by Abe Kennichi. That absolute *worm* of a man feels entitled to control her life in such a way, causing Kimura-san so much terror and despair. Rage starts to boil in Sakura's belly.

What a *creep.*

Back to the issue at hand…her staying with a friend complicates things, Sakura realizes. On the one hand, it will (hopefully) prevent Team Seven's rescue from being immediately noticed and give them a bit more time to get away. But it also drags another, presumably

innocent, person into the fray. Maybe the best option is to send for reinforcements, or relay this info to Konoha so an extraction team can—

“Please, I need to get out of here soon,” Kimura-san pleads silently, misinterpreting Sakura’s silence as reluctance. Then the woman does something with Sakura’s hands that she doesn’t recognize. At Sakura’s confused stare, Kimura-san doesn’t bother repeating the motion, and instead simply presses the girl’s palms against her belly under the water.

Sakura nearly recoils in surprise, but Kimura-san’s grip is surprisingly strong. Then, something very strange happens. Kimura-san’s belly…it *moves.*

Oh, nuts.

She’s pregnant.

The bottom drops out of Sakura’s stomach, anxiety suddenly clenching cold around her lungs. Okay, that *really* shortens the timeline of getting Kimura-san out of here. As in, it needs to happen soon. Like, *tonight.*

“Is it—?”

“Yuu’s.”

“Does Kennichi—"

“No.”

The short, soundless exchange occurs beneath the water while the two continue to chat about their respective lives and careers.

“We’ll take you with us,” Sakura vows. *“Tonight. We’ll come get you from your friend’s house.”*

Kimura-san's expression becomes pinched with worry. *"Saoko, if Kennichi thinks she helped me escape…"*

Crap, that does complicate things. *"We'll come up with a cover story, something that ensures she doesn't seem like an accomplice. But you can't tell her we're coming."*

Kimura-san nods, but before either of them can utter another word or make another sign, a heavy arm is slung around the woman's shoulders, halting both conversations.

"Will you stop yammerin' in this poor kid's ear?" the newcomer, a red-headed woman, says good-naturedly while she jostles Kimura-san a bit. "I need you to come settle a debate between me 'n Fumiko 'bout which kinda steel is better for kitchen knives, carbon or stainless."

Kimura-san goes with the woman with a quiet chuckle and a small wave to Sakura, because of course she does, it would look weird if she didn't. That fact doesn't stop Sakura from staring after her with a rather forlorn look on her face, faced now with many, *many* decisions to make.

The first of which is how the heck she's going to explain this to her teacher.

Pakkun regards Sakura with a curious expression when she picks him up and squeezes him close on the way back to the locker room. He's a little lumpier than her pug plushie, but a decent stand-in regardless. His warmth and the softness of his fur, even if it's a little damp, helps soothe her nerves a bit.

He dutifully turns to stare at the stone wall while she changes back into her clothes, but the inquisitive look returns when she picks him back up again.

Holding him close, she mutters, "Sensei's really not gonna like the sound of this."

Predictably, Kakashi-sensei really does not like the sound of it.

He listens quietly and carefully to her anxious, rapidfire explanation while Sasuke and Naruto look on with twin expressions of growing shock and dismay. The four of them are once again safely ensconced in the timber walls of her uncle's farmhouse, but Sakura still feels vulnerable. Every tick of the clock feels like a countdown. The shortening of a fuse. What it leads to, she couldn't say, but probably nothing good.

Sensei's expression is blank while he digests the information, before he heaves a deep sigh.

"Good grief, Sakura-chan, you really know how to get yourself right into the middle of it, don't you?"

She can only muster a shaky smile. "It's like the creepy guy said, I come from a long line of busybodies." Then, more fervently, "But we're gonna help her, right sensei? We can't just leave Kimura-san here. He'll do something bad to her, I'm sure of it."

Kakashi-sensei eyes her for a moment before deflating with another sigh. "Yes, we are going to help her. To be perfectly frank, we don't have a choice if she's truly carrying noble spawn. Knowingly abandoning a relative of the Daimyo——however under-baked they may be—is grounds for execution."

Sakura blinks, distracted for a moment by that tidbit. "Would the council really execute *you?"* she wonders. "Or Sasuke-kun?"

Kakashi-sensei is one of Konoha's most elite ninja and Sasuke is the sole remaining Uchiha…it seems like the very definition of cutting off one's nose to spite their face. There's *no way* the Hokage would allow it.

Nor would he allow them to execute Naruto either, given their weird, special connection that Sakura still has yet to fully suss out.

Which leaves…oh.

The realization sours Sakura's gut. Having her expendability put into such high relief is bad enough, but the fact that it may be forcing her teammates into an unsafe situation…

Amazing, Sakura thinks dourly. Her uselessness is capable of endangering Team Seven in ways she could never have even fathomed.

Before the thought is fully formed, Sakura blurts, "Maybe you guys should go back to Konoha and I'll stay here with Kimura-san and—"

"Sakura." The sharp edge to Kakashi-sensei's voice has the rest of Sakura's words dying in her throat.

But before he can even begin to admonish her for such a suggestion, Naruto and Sasuke's overlapping voices drown him out.

"No *way* Sakura-chan! We would never, ever leave you behind!"

"We agreed as a team to continue this mission, we should see it through as a team, too."

Well, crap. If Sakura's lip had been a little wobbly at the beginning of this conversation, it's undoubtedly approaching critical-wobble -mass now. *Don't cry, you baby!*

"Nobody is leaving anybody behind," her teacher follows up decisively. "So focus up, kiddos. We need to figure out a plan."

The response is immediate and in perfect unison: *"Yes, sensei!"*

Ultimately, the agenda ends up pretty simple: in the wee hours, Kakashi-sensei will go extract Kimura-san solo, under the pretense of arresting her for involvement with the recent environmental misdeeds of the iron mill. Obviously, such charges are a total fabrication, but necessary for diverting any blame from the friend housing her tonight. The letter delivery was merely a front to gain

access to the inside of the mill, whereupon they presumably found enough evidence to warrant an arrest.

Surprisingly, the idea for such deception comes from Naruto.

“It’s not like we’d just arrest the head honcho anyway, right?” Naruto says, leaning back on his hands. He’s seated next to Sakura at the low-profile table in her uncle’s living room.

“You gotta take the right-hand guy first, squeeze ‘im ‘til he snitches, *then* use the intel to arrest the big boss,” he continues with a nod.

“That’s…yes, that’s exactly right,” Kakashi-sensei says, sounding a little surprised. “How did you know that?”

Naruto frowns in thought. “Well, I figure if you arrest some big crime dude and *any* of the case stuff against him falls through, he’s gonna be in the wind, right? Just, *poof.* Gone-zo forever. ”

“Plus he’d have the resources to start covering his tracks, and potentially retaliate against anyone building the case against him,” Sasuke adds, adeptly jumping into the line of thought.

Naruto grins, pleased by the support. “Yeah, yeah! But if you get a buncha real evidence from the henchman guy, you can lock him down for good!”

Kakashi-sensei nods slowly. “And you just…thought of this?”

Naruto looks at him strangely. “Well, yeah…? It just kinda makes sense, doesn’t it?” He signs the word *obvious* almost absentmindedly as he says this.

“...Uh-huh.”

Sensei is looking a little green again, but Sakura grins, finding herself proud of her teammate. “You’ve got good instincts, cousin,” she compliments, and nudges him with an elbow.

His returned smile is so sweet it hurts. “Th-thanks, Sakura-chan!”

She offers her fist and they do their secret handshake before focusing back on the mission at hand.

Right, the mission. The *plan.*

Pakkun will wait with the genin of Team Seven while the extraction occurs, a little outside of Tsurui. Kakashi-sensei will reconvene with them with Kimura-san in tow, and then they’ll beat a hasty retreat back to Konoha. Saoko-san will also get knocked out to deepen the cover story and reduce the risk of immediate retaliation against her.

Speaking of retaliation, though…

“Uncle, will you be okay?” Sakura asks anxiously as they clean up the dishes from dinner. It feels extremely bizarre to be doing something so mundane when a very daunting and potentially dangerous task awaits them in a few hours. She’d barely tasted the stew, which is a shame because her uncle makes a *killer* oden.

“I’ll be fine,” he waves a dismissive hand. Then he seems to actually consider the question for a moment. “Although…maybe I’ll make a surprise visit to a couple of aggie pals I’ve got in Iron. Discuss that leek plague happening in Grass country, see if we can’t figure out where it’s coming from.”

Sakura blinks, a little lost at the apparent non-sequitur. “Oh, um, sure…?”

Kakashi-sensei chooses that moment to appear out of nowhere, deftly stealing the pile of bowls and plates from Sakura’s arms with one hand and resting his other elbow on the crown of her head, like she’s the countertop at a bar instead of a human.

“I think that’s a great idea,” he interjects. Then he takes apparent pity on Sakura and the anxious energy she’s beaming up at him from under his arm, and explains, “It’s unlikely that Abe would be willing to

cross the border to pursue your uncle. He'd be risking extradition, and Iron is notoriously harsh on foreign criminals."

"One of my buddies is part of Iron's environmental magistrate, so I imagine he's got some connections, too," Uncle Musashi adds.

"Even better," Kakashi-sensei nods. "Though I am sorry for the disruption, Haruno-san. I can't imagine a midnight exodus to another country is part of your nightly routine."

"Could be, they've got great ginjō-shu over there," Uncle Musashi shrugs. "Anyhow, don't sweat it. Just keep my little sprout here safe, alright?"

Sakura groans, embarrassed. *"Uncle."*

Musashi chuckles. "Sorry, sorry, my seedling," he amends, a crooked grin on his face.

"Uncle!"

But Kakashi-sensei just says, "I'll do my best," and gives the man a thumbs up and a wink. It's actually rather reminiscent of Gai-sensei.

Once night falls, Uncle Musashi sets off on one of his wagons, pulled by a grizzled, brown pony that Sakura is pretty sure is immortal.

("Yuzu is still *alive?"* Sakura had gasped when she saw the hoofed beast her uncle brought in from the pasture. That pony had allegedly been around forty freaking years old when Sakura was a *toddler.*

"And kickin'," her uncle had quipped back. "And I mean that literally, watch her hindquarters or she'll nail ya.")

He's accompanied by a sensei-clone, which helps relieve *some* of Sakura's anxiety but not much. *Please be safe,* Sakura pleads silently as she watches the dim shape of the wagon grow smaller and smaller in the moonlight.

After his departure, Kakashi-sensei takes the three genin a little ways out west of Tsurui, to a cluster of young deciduous trees flanked by a creek.

“It’s not great cover, but it’s better than nothing,” their teacher allows, before he hustles them over to a particularly low-hanging swath of branches and has them crouch huddled close in its shadows.

“Stay small and quiet,” Kakashi-sensei orders, also sinking down into a squat so the four of them are moderately eye-to-eye. “Pakkun will alert you when I’m close, then get ready to run. Got it?”

“Got it,” is the muttered, unified response.

“Good.” Kakashi-sensei stands, his knees cracking, and takes a moment to look down at his team as he tugs the hood of his sweatshirt over his hair. “Aw, you guys look like little jizo statues. It’s adorable.”

Then he’s gone.

Sakura counts the seconds. One minute, two. They crawl by so slowly, it’s *agony.* It’s cold out tonight, but Sakura is sweating where her shoulders are pressed tightly to her teammates, and her left ear is just *ringing, ringing, ringing.* The only sounds in her right are the crunch of leaves underfoot and the light snorts that occasionally accompany Pakkun’s breathing.

Tick, tock. There’s no clock out here but the seconds march by like a drum against her skull, a steady metronome her heart seems determined to outpace. That fuse grows short and shorter.

At the very least, she reassures herself, Kakashi-sensei didn’t seem *too* worried about the situation. He was way more concerned during the Wave mission, much more dire in his commands and overall demeanor. Sakura trusts his judgment, so if he thinks this scenario is less dangerous, then he’s probably right.

(Right?)

The more time that passes, the more tense Sakura grows. Her jaw is clenched so tightly it's making her teeth ache, and she can no longer feel her fingers from how twisted they've become in the hem of her haori. Sasuke, and even the usually boisterous Naruto, have remained also silent and motionless on her flanks.

It's so quiet, how does everything feel so loud?

Suddenly, Pakkun shifts minutely. Hope and adrenaline spiking in equal parts, Sakura funnels chakra to her eyes and nose, aiming to catch a glimpse or a whiff of their impending sensei.

But…there's nothing.

Sakura sucks in a tiny, soundless breath. The silence and stillness are a cage around them, filling every crevice and breath with frigid heaviness. They're at the bottom of an invisible ocean, crushed and frozen and so, so alone in this endless dark.

Then, Pakkun's hackles begin to rise, the soft fur a spiky ridge between his shoulders. The pug's eyes grow huge, and his nostrils start to flare.

Sakura feels the hair on the back of her neck stand up, and an icy fingernail of dread skitters down her spine. She's never seen the dog look so worried…so *afraid* in her life.

"Something's wrong."

Naruto's whisper in her ear somehow slips beneath the notice of the silence, thin and breathless enough that it barely registers as more than the rustle of grass.

Sakura shifts, and her sandal catches on a piece of bark. That scratch of rubber on wood is the first crack in the stillness that has them pinned like rabbits in a snare.

“Sakura-chan, I can feel Kakashi-sensei’s chakra, and something’s *wrong.”* His voice is louder this time, barely a whisper. The second crack.

“Pups,” Pakkun growls, his voice deadly serious and quiet. “You need to—"

And perhaps that would have been the third crack, the one that lead to a splintering. But it doesn’t matter, because the void-mantle around the genin shatters when Kakashi-sensei lands heavily in front of them, the quiet *thump* of his sandals a thundercrash. He stumbles before crumpling to one knee.

Sakura’s world is white noise.

“We need to run,” he croaks. *“Now.”*

Sakura manages to lunge forward in time to catch their teacher before he falls, her body a small but determined mast.

“Sensei!” she cries, one chakra-boosted hand supporting his chest while the other flies to his face. His eyelids are fluttering erratically, and she can feel his whole body seize every few seconds. A cut on his temple is bleeding badly, but there are no other obvious wounds on his body. No *way* that little bump is enough to cause *this.*

“He was poisoned.”

Sakura flinches, only just now realizing that there’s an entire *person* clinging to sensei’s back. It’s Kimura-san, her eyes huge with fear. The woman finally lets go of Kakashi-sensei, slipping off of his back to mirror his kneeling in the grass.

“It’s a chakra-activated poison,” Sakura flinches again, because Pakkun’s voice is suddenly close, his snout frantically snuffling against Kakashi-sensei’s head next to her own. “I’ve seen these before, during the war.”

“It’s all my fault!” Kimura-san suddenly wails. “Saoko, she—I didn’t know, but she—" gasping sobs break up the nearly-unintelligible words, and for the second time in her life, Sakura truly wants to *hurt* someone in front of her. The overwhelming urge to strike this woman is only interrupted by sensei’s voice.

“Nuke-nin,” he manages, the words slow and heavy. “Killed him, but, two others.”

Kakashi-sensei fully collapses then, and it’s all Sakura can do to catch him, to cradle his huge body in her skinny little arms. When she gets him facing up, his expression is crumpled, a miserable fury glittering in his eyes.

“‘m sorry,” he chokes out, the pain and self-recrimination in his voice like a blade through Sakura’s heart. “Couldn’t—" but the next words never make it out, and her teacher convulses again before going unconscious.

“Saoko, my best friend, my *friend—"* Kimura-san cries. “Kennichi must have—I don’t—she tried to *hurt me*—he saved me but then I—I didn’t know—I just reacted and he got hurt and it’s all my *fault—"*

It clicks, suddenly, what occurred. Saoko must have been working for Abe Kennichi, and betrayed Kimura, presumably with the help of this nuke-nin. Kakashi got caught in the crossfire and now seems to be both seizing and succumbing to heavy sedation simultaneously, the poison either triggered or strengthened by the victim’s chakra.

It figures, Sakura thinks as she pulls her teacher close. *The one time he would be better off with chakra exhaustion, he’s got plenty.*

“We need to go,” Pakkun all but snarls. “Hostiles approaching from three o'clock and fast. Let’s move!”

“Sasuke, grab Kimura-san. Naruto, you grab our backpacks,” Sakura commands, before bending to worm her torso underneath Kakashi-

sensei's. With a deep breath, she summons her chakra, braces her core, and *lifts.*

He goes up surprisingly easily into the fireman's carry, but the fact of the matter is that he's a big man and she is not, and therefore he makes for unwieldy luggage. This is going to be rough.

Straightening, she can see that the boys followed her orders without hesitation. Kimura-san appears to have gone a little catatonic with shock, but that's fine.

She turns to Naruto and says, "Make clones and scatter them, draw as much attention away from us as possible. We're traveling in formation gyō-rin."

(Sakura isn't really sure where it comes from, the urgent clarity that settles over her sometimes during moments like these, but she's grateful for it when it arrives.)

Gyō-rin, or *fish scales,* is a defensive formation they learned on the way back from the Wave mission. Kakashi-sensei on point, Sasuke to the left, Naruto in the rear, and Sakura on the right so her good ear is facing the outside world. It's a tight formation, the four of them traveling almost shoulder to shoulder, and resulted in many collisions when they were first learning it.

Now, they move like a well-oiled machine.

Sakura, who leads the charge tonight, is thankful for that practice.

Unfortunately, the enemy nin are approaching from the east, which is the direction they ultimately need to be going to get home. North of them lies the forest at the foot of the Sōkōmushi-sanmyaku, and south is nothing but farmland, idyllic pastures and sweeping hills of soybean plots. Or as Sakura has heard older shinobi call it, *sitting duck country.*

They head north.

Three pairs of children's sandals and one set of paws pound the earth, their path a beeline to the forest ahead. Wild chicory and neat lines of cabbage are trampled alike, causing a near-overwhelming onslaught of oily, bitter smells in Sakura's chakra-boosted nose.

Just keep moving. Don't stop.

Sakura has never run so hard in her life.

Kakashi-sensei's dead weight is crushing her, her braced core preventing her lungs from expanding fully. A short gasp with every stride is all she can manage, which is just enough to keep her going. The air burns in Sakura's throat, her guts roil at the constant tension. It's similar to the feeling after a double flicker, a body pushed to its absolute limit.

She keeps running.

"They're gaining on us," Pakkun growls from her right as they plunge into the forest.

Crap, the decoys didn't work, Sakura grimaces.

The forest they dash through is nothing like the towering cedars and behemoth sequoias that Sakura is accustomed to, all spindly firs and a thick underbrush of ferns and—

Suddenly, it's gone.

Team Seven skids to a halt as the forest thins and then vanishes around them, emptying into a small, sparse plateau. Rockfall and smashed boulders flank the clearing, and before them the earth goes nothing but *up.*

Up, up, *up.* Sakura's jaw drops in horror and awe at the mountainside before her, and feels a brief, nonsensical stab of regret for thinking of the Sōkōmushi-sanmyaku as being modest. It's unlike anything she's ever seen.

Enormous columns of basalt tower above them, austere and unrelenting, layers and layers of jointed volcanic rock formed over the millenia. The jutting bundles of igneous slabs almost remind her of the pagodas she's seen in shrines, breathtaking in their height and hexagonal shape.

Well, it *would* be breathtaking, if it didn't make climbing almost impossible.

Crap, crap, crap. There's no way she can adhere herself to the wall and carry sensei at the same time, at least not with any meaningful speed. And getting into a fight on such difficult terrain means that just one wrong *step* could be fatal. It's not an option.

The dread is an anvil in Sakura's belly as she frantically casts around for another way out. *Why didn't I look further ahead?* she despairs.

"We're dead meat if we stay here," Sasuke's voice, tight with warning, cuts through her spiraling.

And yes, they are. Cornered like prey.

"You three run, I'll stay behind to delay them as much as I can," Pakkun barks. "It won't give you much extra time, but—"

"No!" Sakura cuts him off. "I won't let you. Sensei said nobody is getting left behind."

He bares his little teeth at her. "Pup, I'm not asking."

"But—"

"I know these mountains," Kimura-san interjects suddenly. "I grew up here."

Sakura could *bite* the woman. "This is *not* the time—"

“There’s an abandoned mine just west of here,” Kimura-san continues. “I can’t remember which direction it goes, but I know it leads to another opening.”

An abandoned mine? The absolute last thing Sakura wants to do right now is to go crawling around in the dark, but a way out is a way out. A sickly jolt of claustrophobia turns her stomach, but she takes the feeling by the neck and throttles it.

She can be scared later. Now is the time to act.

“Naruto, take point!” Sakura orders, and he immediately hops into formation. “Kimura-san, tell us where to go.”

After they take off once more, Pakkun adds, “Once we’re in there, I should be able to lead us to the other opening by scent.”

That sends a wave of relief through Sakura. That’s one less thing to worry about, at least.

They send another squadron of Naruto clones to hopefully distract and/or delay their pursuers, and in less than a minute find themselves standing before a large hole in the mountain wall, the portal framed by three pieces of dilapidated timber. It looks old, and mere moments away from collapsing.

They head in anyway.

Just keep moving.

The tunnels are dark. So, *so* dark. It’s a darkness unlike anything she’s experienced, a total deprivation of sense. Thankfully, her chakra solves that, as the sharingan does for Sasuke, but Naruto isn’t so lucky. They reform to the *stout tortoise* formation to adapt; two closely packed pairs. Pakkun and Sakura lead, while Sasuke and Naruto follow.

They can’t move at full speed like this, thoroughly handicapped by the pitch black and obstacle course borne of stone and decrepit machinery, but manage a decent pace. Sakura tries *not* to pay attention to the heavy dampness of the air in here, or that she feels like she’s drowning with every gasp. Instead, she focuses on Kakashi-sensei’s steady heartbeat against her shoulder, matching its cadence with her steps.

Somehow, time is different down here. The seconds stretch unfathomably long, the echo of their rapid footsteps a slower thrum than the shrine bell at New Years. *Thud, thud, thud.* It’s like running in a dream, each stride forward is a regression.

Hysterically, Sakura wonders if they’ve managed to cover any distance at all.

“They’re in the tunnels,” Pakkun growls, and Sakura’s stomach bottoms out with dread. *Already?!*

They’re losing ground, and fast.

We’re screwed, she wants to say, a hopeless shriek into the endless black.

Instead, she asks, “How close are we to the exit?”

“Not very close,” he responds grimly. “There’s a fork in the tunnels coming up—”

“A fork?” Kimura-san interrupts, startling Sakura. She’d thought the woman had finally passed out. None of this can be good for the baby, Sakura notes with a bolt of new panic.

“There’s a haulageway by that fork,” Kimura-san manages, her words splintered by short, panicked breaths. “Immediately after the left path splits off. It’s a shortcut.”

A shortcut? Well *that* sounds way too good to be true, but they turn left at the fork anyways.

And…in a way, it *is* too good to be true, because apparently haulageways are not meant for people, and instead were designed for transporting ore and small machinery. The tunnel is *tiny,* barely tall enough for Sakura to fit into while hunched over, and certainly not wide enough to proceed in anything but single-file.

“I can smell outside air,” Pakkun says when she looks to him. “It’ll work.”

Pakkun takes the lead now. Carrying Kakashi-sensei over her shoulders doesn’t fit, so Sakura drapes his body over her back, secures him by zipping his jacket closed around her body, and crawls on her freaking hands and knees. Her teacher's chin is hooked over her shoulder so they’re practically mashed cheek-to-cheek.

It’s absurd and awkward and painful and *holy crap* if they survive, Sakura is going to cash in with *extreme interest* on that lifetime supply of anmitsu that sensei already owes her for fixing his eye.

Thankfully, at least Kimura-san is only about as tall as Naruto, and can be carried safely via piggyback. Small victories.

From behind him, Sakura can hear Pakkun busily sniffing the damp air. “I think they took the main path,” he says. “Their scent is getting more faint, like they’re going the wrong way.”

“The main tunnels become pretty confusing after the fork,” Kimura-san pants. “They might have gotten lost.”

Freaking *finally,* something worked out in their favor. Sakura would fist-pump if it was physically possible.

“Hear that, sensei?” she mutters into the cloth of his sweatshirt. *“Nobody* is getting left behind.” The reminder is for her as much as it

is for him.

After another few minutes of the fastest crawling of her life (and *ow* did her palms and knees take a beating), Sakura is deeply relieved to see the haulageway open up into a larger space. Even better than *that,* she can feel cool, fresh evening air tickle her cheeks. The scent of grass and moss has never smelled so good.

We made it!

Sakura all but faceplants into the ground after exiting the small tunnel, and takes a few seconds to catch her breath. Then, she unzips sensei's jacket to free herself and hauls him back up into a fireman's carry. Her muscles tremble with the effort, burning uncomfortably, and her chakra feels pretty low. This game of cat and mouse can't go on much longer, she realizes grimly.

The new space is a large cavern, mostly bare except for a tall pile of broken and rusted carts on one side. Stalactites of basalt hang from the surprisingly high ceiling, and a huge, yawning entrance opposite to the haulageway leads out into the night.

Sakura is about to decide on a formation when Pakkun freezes, his hackles rising again.

Oh no.

"They're coming straight at us," he growls.

Kimura-san gasps. "How?!"

"Earth ninjutsu?" Sakura guesses, adrenaline pumping anew in her blood.

"Doesn't matter," Pakkun shakes his head. "We've got maybe two minutes until they get here."

Something slides into place in Sakura's chest when she hears that, a certainty. She knows—she's *known*—what she must do.

“Come on,” she urges her teammates towards the entrance. “I have a plan.”

Once outside, Sakura carefully transfers Kakashi-sensei to Naruto’s shoulders. “Take good care of him, okay?”

He eyes her, apparently catching onto her weird tone. *Nice going, Sakura.*

“Okay,” he agrees, unusually somber.

“ETA is ninety seconds,” Pakkun barks, and Sakura takes that as her cue.

She digs out several exploding tags and kunai. “I’m going to block off the entrance,” she explains. “It won’t buy a lot of time, but maybe a little.”

“Good thinking,” Sasuke nods.

“After that, the plan is to run straight to Konoha. No stops, *none,”* Sakura says, her voice hard. Then, she hurls the kunai at the entrance of the cave, chakra lending her the necessary power and speed to pierce stone. They land perfectly distanced along the top, and the exploding tags begin to fizz.

“Run as fast as you can until you guys reach the village or find a shinobi you can trust. Got it?” Chakra floods her body, tip to toe.

Sasuke nods, and Naruto salutes. “Got it!” Then he freezes. “Wait, what do you mean *you guys—"*

In near perfect synchrony, the tags detonate and Sakura flickers back into the mouth of the cave.

She whirls to face her team as massive slabs of splintered basalt begin to crash down, like the great fangs of a beast closing on a throat. The looks on Naruto and Sasuke’s faces—shock, betrayal,

fear—are a lance to the heart. But this is the *only way* there's any chance of them getting home alive. *I hope they can forgive me.*

"I'm sorry!" she cries, though the words are lost within the explosive noise of rockfall and shattering stone.

Within seconds, the mouth of the cave has fully collapsed, blotting out the moonlight…

…and sealing Sakura inside.

DUN DUN DUN.....just when u thought it couldn't get worse lol.

poor kakashi, he's really gonna hate himself for getting a little cocky, isn't he?

anyway here is RRD kakashi in my mind, sans new sweatshirt/jacket combo. he doesn't this hairstyle....YET.....

[img: https://64.media.tumblr.com/ffc457d87d235191c44763eb1df4ccf6/7ad7def65afd7af5-96/s1280x1920/64c249e6b4ae76cd9e08385f0f87a35eaf209275.jpg]

comments give me life and fuel my writing! thanks for reading :)

next time: cornered and alone, sakura's skills are put to the test.

The reaping hour

Chapter 13: The reaping hour

---

thank you all again for such a lovely response to this piece. your comments are such a delight to read, and inspire me greatly. it's also very fun to read your plot-related speculations...some of you predicted a few things in this chapter!

NOTE: it also makes me super happy that you all enjoy my world-building (chakra theory, etc). related to that...i ended up coming up with an entirely different explanation for the origin of chakra, which means no sage! (or kaguya for that matter). which means i had to go back and switch out all of the "sage" related expletives and whatnot and replace it with "god/gods" in this story, so i apologize if that literary switch-up and if it's bothersome to your immersion. the origin i came up with is more closely entwined with shinto deities and mythology, which will begin to be introduced in the coming chapters. i have also decided that madara is fully dead in this so if you're hoping to see him, i'm sorry! the izanagi technique is simply too ridiculous/plot device-y for me to stomach. there are plenty of canon big bads left for sakura to tangle with, tho!

i was pretty proud of ch 12 (the hot springs dual conversation is one of my fav scenes i've written) but this chapter i am also quite pleased with. i hope you all enjoy! and happy new year :) may it be full of opportunity and joy.

minor warning for violence in this chapter, but nothing outside of standard naruto levels IMO.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Sakura’s chest heaves as the rumbles finally die down, the earsplitting crashes eventually replaced by the clatter of smaller stones and the chitter of pebbles.

Finally, utter silence, other than the thundering of her heart.

“That was some move, pup.”

Sakura yelps in surprise, and whips around to see–

“Pakkun-sensei!” she cries, shocked beyond belief. “What are you—how did you—"

He snorts. “I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve too, you know.”

Sakura just stares down at the little pug for a moment, equal parts horrified and relieved that she’s not totally alone. Her lower lip wobbles traitorously.

“Speaking of tricks, we’ve got about thirty seconds until our new friends arrive. Let’s set up a nice welcome for them, shall we?” Pakkun growls, and Sakura jumps to attention.

“Yes, sensei!”

It’s not a very sophisticated trap, but the element of surprise is on their side. Sakura manages to place the last exploding tag, conjure up a single illusory clone, and scramble up the cave wall to hang from one of the stalactites just in time. *Oh papa,* she thinks with a wry grimace. *If only you could see your little fruit bat now.*

The intruders arrive with a lot less fanfare than Sakura had anticipated. She imagined a tunneling ninjutsu would be more destructive, but they merely step out of the wall as if it’s made of liquid instead of rock. Well, one of them does—the other stumbles out, coughing and spitting out dirt.

“I fuckin’ *hate* that technique,” he gripes, looking like he just took a sand bath. “You earth-release freaks are like goddamn moles.”

The other man, thin and dark-haired, just shrugs. “I’ll leave you in the tunnels to rot next time, then.”

They look like… *people,* which is weird, somehow. After being chased like that, it seems like they should be monsters, with big sharp teeth and hooked talons. The sandy man is short, squat, and fair-haired, clothed in a plain gi, a thin goatee gracing his chin. The earth release fellow has long dark locks pulled into a low ponytail and is wearing oddly formal clothes.

The response of the sandy man is cut short when they finally notice clone-Sakura on the ground, her body a crumpled mess in the middle of the room. A few slabs of basalt have her pinned. Tragic indeed.

“Yikes,” sand-man sneers, and begins to walk towards the clone. “Thought I heard some kinda explo—"

The rest of that sentiment is lost to the detonation of four more tags, two beneath their feet and two above their heads. Sakura would have used more, but she’s starting to run a little low—she’ll need to be judicious with the rest.

Sand-man manages to react in time, leaping away with quicker reflexes than Sakura thought he’d have. He looks like the brutish slugger type, but seems pretty light on his feet. The dark-haired man isn’t so lucky, and Sakura feels a bolt of relief when she sees him out cold, thrown by the blast against the cavern wall.

One down, she thinks, and lets out a gusty sigh of relief.

—which is a really freaking dumb thing to do because sand-man’s head snaps up, his eyes landing right on her.

Well, time to face the music.

Taking advantage of the man’s distraction, Pakkun dashes out from behind a rock to slam his little head into the back of sand-man’s

knees, throwing off his balance. At the same time, Sakura launches herself from the stalactite and drops a chakra-boosted axe-kick down onto his head. It's weaker than she'd like, because hoo-boy is she *tired,* but he crumples anyway, driven down to his knees by the force.

Sakura and Pakkun leap away, and the genin arms herself with a kunai. *Okay,* she thinks to herself, feeling buoyed by the relative success of that. *Maybe we do have a chance after all.*

But the sand-man just chuckles, clambering back up to his feet while he stretches his neck a little. "That hurt, you little cunt," he grumbles, looking annoyed but *way* less concussed than any reasonable person should have been after a blow like that.

He cracks his neck again and then rushes at her.

With a yelp, Sakura stumbles to block and parry the rain of blows. The man's strikes are practiced and clean, every movement of his body a calculated action, exacting in its precision. He must be some kind of martial arts master, Sakura realizes. She's heard of monks training to withstand impact, but this guy isn't bald, so—

Sakura is punished for her momentarily wandering thoughts with a punch to the gut, and she folds with a wet cough, stumbling backwards. *Oof.*

A high-pitched snarl sounds from her right, and she sees Pakkun launch himself at the man, sinking his fangs into the meat of his calf.

Sand-man grunts in surprise, and then kicks the dog away carelessly. Sakura can't help her shriek of horrified rage as she watches his little furry body tumble away, her heart cracking at the pained whine he lets out.

"Pakkun-sensei!" she cries, and goes to follow, but that punch had stolen the air from Sakura's lungs and she stumbles, dizzy.

Sand-man eyes her before a thoughtfully cruel smile curls his lips. “I’ve never been much of a dog person,” He hums, before his hands begin to fly through a series of signs that Sakura knows all too well.

No!

Sakura’s body is flooded with chakra before she even thinks about it. She manages a clumsy flicker just in time to throw her body over Pakkun’s as the great blast of fire erupts from sand-man’s mouth.

She’s lucky indeed, that the *whole body vitalization* required for a flicker isn’t too dissimilar from the spatial reconstruction required of her chakra for heat-proofing. She’s even luckier that Kakashi-sensei made her practice it again and again and *again* until it only required effort, instead of concentration.

Sakura lets out a whimper as she curls over Pakkun more tightly. Even with her heat-proofing activated, the intensity of the flames is horrible. Beyond the pain, which *burns,* that sickly, uncomfortable feeling from being overheated pervades her whole body, making her want to writhe and squirm and tear her own skin off. She can’t breathe either, for fear of sucking down the flames, and the roar of the fire is so loud it blots out everything, making her world a tiny, hellish cocoon.

An animal panic is building in the back of her skull, the kind that makes her do stupid, *stupid* things, and right when Sakura is certain she can bear it no longer—

The heat vanishes.

Sakura gasps a great, heaving breath, her lungs feeling like they’re sure to burst. The feeling of being *hot, way too freaking hot* is still there, but the pain is gone. Well, either that or she’s suffering from third-degree burns and all of her nerves are dead. *Hopefully not.*

And while her haori is a little charred, Sakura is neither bald nor naked, meaning her chakra must have protected her hair and

clothes, too. Small miracles.

The smoke billows in great plumes around Sakura, and she takes the momentary cover to clear her head. She needs to get rid of this heat energy—she's practically aglow with it—and *fast* before she loses focus and cooks herself from the inside out. Sakura scrambles into a crouch, and relief bolts through her when she sees that the little pug under her is still breathing. He's panting heavily, but *alive.*

Her right arm is where she's had the most practice, so Sakura inhales deeply and begins to funnel the energy towards her hand. She's dripping with sweat, her armguard completely soaked, which is great because she's going to need a lot of it to sequester all of the heat.

Slowly, much more slowly than she'd like, the heat travels to her arm as if magnetized. The sweat beads strangely on her skin in big, wiggly orbs, and Sakura bites her lip as she tries to congregate that into her palm at the same time. *Crap, this is hard.*

The smoke begins to thin, and Sakura starts to panic—she's not done yet!

Sakura whirls in her crouch, gripping her right wrist with her left hand in almost a sad mockery of chidori. The chakra and heat *is* going where she wants it to, but her arm is beginning to throb.

The last of the smoke finally clears, and she sees the sand-man's expression transform from smug and expectant to complete shock. *Serves you right,* she sneers internally.

He watches her for another moment, calculating, before he shrugs.

Suddenly, he's in front of her.

Sakura flinches, but her reflexes are dulled from exhaustion. A cry of pain escapes her mouth when he fists a hand in her hair and yanks her cruelly upwards.

“Seems like the Academy is churning out tougher stuff these days,” he comments, shaking her a bit. “I think I’ll enjoy this.”

The shock causes Sakura’s focus to waver, and a burst of pain in her arm has her gasping. No, no, *no* her arm is going to become barbecue at this rate!

With seemingly minimal effort, he tosses Sakura a few feet away. She hits the ground with a grunt and a whimper, taking the brunt of the impact on her side. She clutches her right wrist as tightly as she can, like holding down a lid, but the pressure is building; the energy desperate to squirm its way out.

A foot pushes her onto her back, and then an enormous weight sinks onto her abdomen. The man has straddled her, and as thick fingers close around her throat, Sakura *panics.*

Her rationality is completely gone; the only thing Sakura can perceive now is the feeling of being trapped. The weight on her stomach, the tightness around her trachea, the fear and pain shrieking in her skull. *No no no no no—!*

She’s going to die, she knows it now, the pain in her arm is sure to burst, to rupture, her muscles splitting and tendons tearing as the relentless heat chases equilibrium. The crushing force on her throat denies Sakura the barest reprieve of breath, and her body seizes. *Sensei, anybody, please, help me!*

Her mouth open in a silent, stolen howl, her mind aflame, Sakura claws at his face. The pressure in her arm, as if beckoned, *erupts.*

The blast of steam shrieks like a beast as it releases, a volcanic phantom escaping into the atmosphere. The force of it knocks sand-man back, and he lands on his rump while Sakura scrambles away.

The air in her lungs and the relief in her arm has Sakura sobbing, choked gasps of hysterical joy. She crawls until there’s several feet of distance between her and the man, before collapsing. Her right

arm, while less painful now, feels *wrong.* It throbs and tingles and feels numb in some spots. The glove of her arm guard apparently disintegrated in the blast, and the skin revealed beneath is blistered and looks, alarmingly, like raw meat.

A wet rasping breath steals her attention, and Sakura manages to push herself up onto her elbows to see her opponent. Sand-man's fireball had left the wooden ties of some cart railway tracks aflame, resulting in a rather warmly lit and inviting atmosphere in the cavern. It also means Sakura doesn't need to focus chakra into her eye tenketsu to see in the dark anymore.

After one look at him, however, she wishes that weren't true.

Sand-man's face is…gone, for lack of a better word. What's left of the skin, shredded and raw, is a more brilliant crimson than she's ever seen, flecked with yellow-white. Clear liquid bubbles and hisses as it drips down his cheeks, and Sakura realizes with a wave of nausea that it's coming from his eyes, which have completely ruptured. Somehow his head looks bulbous and shrunken all at once, skin pulling tight to reveal the whites of his teeth as it swells rapidly.

He lets out a weak moan that suddenly becomes choked, and begins grasping at his own throat. The wet gurgles of his futile breaths echo throughout the cavern.

The steam, it must have gone into his mouth, his trachea… the blast had scalded him all of the way down into his lungs, rendering them useless. He thrashes like a rabbit caught in a snare, making helpless, choked noises of fear.

Sakura watches, horrified, as the man slowly drowns on dry land. Finally, he goes still.

Sakura can only stare. *Did I just…?*

But the rest of that thought is cut off by the sound of a dog whimpering.

“Pakkun-sensei!” Sakura gasps with a start, and belly-crawls her way back over to the pug.

He’s still panting, and Sakura can see that his gums are bright red, a sure sign of overheating. If only she had water! Sakura curses internally, wishing dearly right now that she had her backpack instead of having given it to Naruto.

He doesn’t move, but his eyes find hers. “You…good?” he manages between pants, and Sakura can’t help the tearful giggle she lets out.

“Peachy,” she replies, before dropping her head to rest it on her arms. A bone-deep exhaustion settles over her body.

“We…we did it,” she mumbles. And a good thing too, she’s nearly out of chakra. Another minute of—

“Fuck, my head hurts.”

Sakura flinches, her head whipping up as dread bolts through her entire body. *Crap,* she thinks wildly, panic bubbling up again. *I forgot about the other guy!*

Pakkun groans. “Damn,” he pants. “I thought he was out cold.”

“He *was,”* Sakura all but whimpers, as if saying it could make it true again.

But unfortunately for her, the man does not magically pass out again, and spends another few seconds rubbing the back of his head before he looks around and lays eyes on her.

His gaze tracks between Sakura and his fallen comrade, and a look of surprise crosses his face before it becomes grim and thoughtful. Then he shakes his head, *tsking* quietly, before using the wall to help himself into a standing position, a little unsteady.

Sakura watches with despair as he dusts himself off, a pit of indignant disappointment burning in her belly. *It's not fair!* She wants to wail, she wants to stomp her foot and throw a tantrum. She fought really freaking hard, her arm really freaking hurts, she's *really* freaking tired, and why can't things just be easy for *once?!*

Instead, Sakura inhales deep, before shoving herself to her feet. If there's something that Sakura has gotten pretty good at, it's standing back up.

"Discipline is a muscle," she remembers reading in *Kuzushi no ri. "Exercise it often, and you will find yourself capable of achieving great feats."*

A wry smile curls her lip. *I dunno about any great feats, Noguchi-sensei, but I'll be pretty proud if I survive this.*

The man watches her, and she watches him. They regard each other in relative peace for a few heartbeats, washed in a warm glow from the burning track ties.

The moment shatters when his hands begin to fly through a series of signs, and Sakura takes off for the opposite side of the cavern. She needs to draw fire away from Pakkun, who is still incapacitated by heat shock. Beyond that, she doesn't have a plan.

The man mirrors her, dashing in a diagonal to keep them parallel while still closing in. Then he releases the technique.

Son of a—!

Sakura is forced to launch herself backwards to avoid the huge spikes suddenly jutting out of the ground. Great, piercing columns of basalt spring forth from the earth, and if she gets too close to it, the wall.

Helpless to do anything else, Sakura continues to dodge, flinging herself as far away as possible. The man jogs after her, fingers still

steepled together in a bird seal. The jutting spikes follow, reaching for her like grasping talons.

He's got a limited range, she realizes abruptly. Fifteen feet, maybe twenty. It's a powerful technique, but presumably draws far more chakra when used in a longer range. That means he can't remain stationary if she keeps moving. The freshly-born forest of basalt thorns also provides her with a bit of cover while impeding his movement.

If I could lure him… Sakura doesn't think too hard about it and digs into her exploding tag pouch, grabbing the remaining three with a wince. Her right hand burns, raw skin rubbed uncomfortably by the nylon of her belt. Her fingers can barely close into a fist tight enough to hold onto the pieces of paper, which is worrying, but will have to be dealt with later.

It's like her first race with Lee all over again; Sakura realizes with a start as she throws herself backwards through the obstacle course. Muscle memory, even from just that one morning, aids her now as she uses the spikes like the starting blocks of a sprinter, flinging herself in a zig-zag pattern over the man's head.

He whirls with a snarl, sending even more jagged columns after the genin. This time, one nearly gets her, grazing her left shoulder. The sound of it exploding from the ground had been dulled by her bad ear.

I need to finish this. Thankfully, he'd wandered right into her trap. Sakura vaults over a large basalt spear to crouch behind it, sticks her fingers in *both* ears because she really doesn't need to double down on the hearing loss, and prays.

The exploding tags detonate on cue, hidden from the man's eyes by the cage of stone thorns he'd created. She hears him shout in pain. It's not a direct hit because of the spikes, but that kind of combustive force should be pretty damaging regardless.

Sakura peeks out from behind the spear as the dust settles, steeling herself for a gory spectacle.

Except…there's nothing but a pile of rocks.

No, it can't be. Her stomach bottoms out with fear. *An earth clone? When?!*

It was her stupid freaking *hand,* she realizes. She'd flinched when grabbing the tags, giving him a moment to replace himself with a clone. Those *milliseconds* were enough for him, a feat she could only dream of.

It's really only now that Sakura begins to realize how outclassed she is.

"You're clever, I'll give you that."

The voice startles Sakura, and she whirls. The dark-haired man is perched on one of the stone spears, gazing down at her. His expression is oddly gentle.

"Unlike my colleague, I take no pleasure in killing. I'll make this quick," he says, and draws a sinister looking blade from his hip.

Sakura stares numbly up at him, unable to move. She's utterly spent.

At the very least, she reasons, *I managed to buy my team some time.*

Naruto, Sasuke…Kakashi-sensei…please be okay.

Something flashes in her mind then, a memory. Sitting at the counter of Ichiraku with her teacher, warm and safe and happy. It feels like a lifetime ago.

"Sakura-chan, do you have a favorite passage in that book?" Sensei had asked. "I'm acquainted with Noguchi-sensei, but I haven't read any of his works."

“Yeah, one sec,” Sakura responded, setting her chopsticks down to flip through Kuzushi no ri.

“Here we go,” she muttered, and began to read.

“When you’re in a pinch, rely on your friends! Even if your comrades aren’t physically there with you, the memory of them will fire up your spirit and give you the strength to fight on.”

The memory sends a pang through her chest. Sakura’s fist clutches reflexively at the fabric over her heart, where she keeps *Kuzushi no ri.* There’s that note, too, the one left for her right before the mission in Wave, tucked safely between its pages. That’s where she wants to be right now, wrapped tightly up with her team. To be pressed shoulder to shoulder between her boys, or to be warm in the protective cage of Kakashi-sensei’s arms.

But they’re not here right now, which means Sakura must forge on alone. And if she allows this man to escape and pursue her team… who knows what could happen, what reinforcements he could call for. She simply cannot take that risk.

Ah. The realization is swift and settles like an anvil in her chest, undeniable, heavy.

I need to stop fighting like I’m going to get out of this alive.

It’s an oddly freeing sentiment, and Sakura summons those last embers of chakra as she stands from crouching. Her legs wobble like a newborn foal’s, sapped of their strength, but she manages to stay upright.

Just a bit more, she soothes, pulling out a kunai. *Just a little longer.*

The man hops down from his perch and rushes her. Sakura meets the blade that seeks her jugular with a hard parry, enough that it throws off his stance. It throws off hers too, but that’s fine. He

recovers expertly, using the shifting of his weight spin into a brutal roundhouse kick.

Sakura does not evade it. She doesn't even try to.

The blow lands with devastating force against her left thigh, and Sakura can feel her femur *bend* before it buckles and snaps with a visceral crunch. At the same time, she molds the last of her chakra into a sticky tar, into countless grasping burrs, and sends it to the point of contact.

And just like that spar with Sasuke so long ago, his foot is momentarily sealed to her body. It buys her just one more precious second, but that's all she needs.

Sakura's blade finds the femoral artery with ease, with his leg presented to her like a roast ready for carving.

They crash to the ground together in a tangle of limbs, but he kicks Sakura away as soon as her chakra releases him. A foolish decision, ultimately, because the genin's kunai remains in her grip, and the movement severs his artery completely.

Sakura is pretty certain of this, because the spray of blood reaches her even from several feet away.

"You *bitch,"* the man snarls, hands clamped around his thigh. The pool of blood around him is growing so rapidly it's practically unreal, nigh comical if it weren't so gruesome. He scrabbles at his hip pouches, presumably looking for something, *anything* to use as a tourniquet.

With a grim set to her mouth, Sakura hurls a handful of shuriken at him, pinning his sleeves to the ground. It's barely a deterrent, but with a bleed like that, it's seconds that matter, not minutes.

The man begins to struggle with his belt, which would probably work well, but his blood-soaked fingers slip clumsily over the leather. He

even gets it around his leg, but a nick in the belt splits into a wide tear when he tries to pull it tight.

“No, *no,”* he moans, clutching at the useless scraps. His movements grow weaker and more desperate with every passing second.

All Sakura can do is drag herself on her elbows to avoid the ever-expanding pool of blood.

“Help me,” he utters in a voice barely more than a whisper. Even more quietly, *“Please.”*

Then, approximately two minutes and fifteen seconds after Sakura had severed his femoral artery, the man expires.

She watches him for a moment, before her elbows buckle and her cheek hits the ground with a muted *thump.*

At last, at long last, Sakura rests.

She wakes to pain.

And it should be known that Sakura is not necessarily a stranger to pain. She broke her collarbone when she was seven after falling out of a tree, and managed to hide it from her parents for almost a full day out of embarrassment. Her period cramps are sometimes so bad she throws up. One time, when her mom was teaching her how to sew, she mishandled a needle and it ended up lodged several millimeters under her index fingernail.

Pain, she knows.

But this is unlike anything she’s ever experienced.

Sakura surges into wakefulness with a gasp that curdles into a choked-off sob. Her leg. Holy gods above, her *leg.*

The only word that ricochets around her mind is *heavy,* that's what the pain is. Hulking, thunderous throbs that pulsate with every beat of her heart, with any movement at all. It's a boiling ache, so crushing in its weight that it steals her breath, turns her mind into static, washes sound into a fuzz of white noise.

She lays there on her belly, gasping through clenched teeth. She tries to quell the sobs because the movement makes it worse, makes the invisible sledgehammer smash into her thigh at a faster tempo.

"Pup. Hey, pup, look at me."

The gravelly voice cuts through the white-hot agony, but barely.

"Pup. *Sakura."*

Sakura doesn't move a hair except to crack one eye open, fearful that somehow light could worsen the pain. "Pakkun-sensei," she croaks, though she can barely hear her own words past the screaming pain. "You're okay."

His short snout hovers mere inches away from her face. "You're not," he deduces.

"I'm not," she agrees. "Sensei, it *hurts."*

He licks her cheek a few times soothingly and says, "I know, pup. I know."

Then he retreats, moving to get a better look at her leg. "Yeesh," he mutters, more to himself. "Okay, hold tight, I gotta go find a stick."

Sakura tries to parse those words in her head, but the pounding agony turns her thoughts into splinters. *A stick? For fetch? Now?*

The burning track ties are mostly coals now, which provide scant light. Pakkun disappears from her view quickly, and Sakura squeezes her eyes shut once more.

Kill me, she begs the world at large. *Please, make it stop.*

Time moves strangely again, like it did in the tunnels, or during the mindwalk. Moments stretching and shrinking. Or maybe she's falling in and out of consciousness, it's a little hard to tell.

The clicking of claws on stone and another lick on her cheek draws Sakura more into wakefulness again. She wishes dearly it hadn't, because the pain begins beating its drum once again.

"Up and at 'em, pup," Pakkun barks. "I need you to roll over."

"No," Sakura answers immediately, with more firmness than she thought herself capable of at this moment. "I can't."

"Too bad," he growls. "You have to."

"No," Sakura snaps this time, her voice shrill. "I can't, Pakkun-sensei! I *can't!"*

It hurts too much, and Sakura is too weak. Always has been, always will be.

"You can," he encourages. "You got this far, now I need you to go a little further."

No, Sakura wails internally. Hadn't she gone far enough? *Done* enough? Hasn't she earned the right to freaking lay here and just be done with it all?!

"Discipline is a muscle."

Infuriatingly, Noguchi-sensei's words float through her mind. *Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit.*

"If you roll over, I'll tell you what Kakashi's face looks like."

Sakura screams her frustration into the dirt. Then, before the fear can stop her, she grips her left thigh with both hands to stabilize as

best she can without looking down because *hell* no, and throws her full weight into a roll.

This time, she screams into the air, and the sound echoes off of the cavern walls. The agony is blinding, literally. Stars and static blot out her vision, and all Sakura can do for several long minutes is lay on her back and cry.

Once her heaving sobs begin to die down, Pakkun is back to being all business.

“Well done” he praises earnestly, though his words are strangely muffled now. “Now, I need you to sit up, slowly.”

Sakura lifts her head just enough to glare at him, and manages between pants, “I thought you said you would tell me about Kakashi-sensei’s face.”

He nods and says, “I sure will, you just gotta sit up first.”

Sakura is beginning to snarl in response when she notices what's clamped in his teeth. Rope, it looks like, some long scraps of fabric, and a belt…?

“Not to worry,” he soothes when he sees her gaze catch on his spoils. “I took this one from the first guy.”

“What—?”

“Come on, sit.”

Sakura wants to laugh at the absurdity of it—a dog, of all things, commanding *her* to roll over and sit—but that would probably just make her leg hurt more, so she stifles the urge.

It takes several bursts of effort to get Sakura sitting. First, she has to fight her way to her elbows, each jostling of her leg a new tsunami of agony, crashing over her again and again. She tries to use her hand

to support herself more upright, but that requires twisting, which makes her hips move, which makes her vision go blurry.

Instead, Sakura takes three short successive inhales to psyche herself up, braces her core, and does a strict sit-up using just her abs.

Turns out that was actually the *worst* decision, because as she quickly finds out, quadriceps are also heavily involved in core-focused work. The tensing of her leg muscles is so painful that Sakura blacks out for a second, but luckily Pakkun had the forethought to dash behind her and use his body to prevent her from flopping back down.

It takes several minutes and many wordless howls, but eventually, Sakura is sitting. Lightheaded and inspired by her own hardiness, the genin takes it upon herself to scooch backwards about four feet so she can lean against a basalt spear (and face away from the pony-tail man's body). This time she *does* black out, but the spear is there to keep her upright. Take *that.*

Then she looks down at her leg, sees the mottled, deeply purple bruises, the bulbous swelling, and unnatural angle of her thigh, and nearly passes out again.

After a minute, she feels moderately lucid, and turns to the pug.

"Good job," Pakkun growls, real pride in his voice. "All that's left is to help me tie a few knots."

Sakura groans, head hanging down to her chest. She's so, so tired, and her leg hurts so badly, and none of this makes any sense. "Why?"

"Because I don't want you to lose that leg, so we're gonna make you a traction splint."

Sakura blinks, so surprised by the words that the pain is briefly lessened. “A traction splint?”

The words sound vaguely familiar, but nothing specific comes to mind. Maybe Kondo-san had mentioned it when giving her those lessons in first-aid.

“Yup,” Pakkun says, already beginning to loop some of the fabric around her ankle with his teeth. “The broken ends of your femur have been pulled past one another because of your muscles locking up,” he explains, and boy isn’t *that* a pleasant image, but it does make sense. “A traction splint can align them again. It will help with the pain.”

In that case, sign her the hell up. Sakura grunts and slowly leans forward to begin tying the loops of fabric around her ankle. She’s beyond crying at this point, just sweating profusely instead. The fingers on her right hand are especially clumsy, swollen and painful from the steam incident earlier.

“Sensei’s face,” she reminds the dog as he trots off to grab a rusty pole, about two feet in length, and drag it back over with his teeth. The axle of one of those broken carts, she would guess.

“Right, right,” Pakkun agrees around the metal. He lines it up next to her bad leg. “He’s, uh, pretty normal looking I guess.”

Sakura finds the energy to pout, somehow. “Sensei, come on.”

“Let’s finish this, and I’ll tell you everything.”

Sakura harrumphs, feeling swindled in addition to sweaty and exhausted and half-dead, but it’s not like she’s got a lot of bargaining power here. “Fine.”

Ultimately, they tie the metal pole to the outer side of her injured leg, attaching it to her kunai pouch that gets slid higher to sit right in the crease of her thigh, and further strapping down the splint with a belt

right below her knee. A single kunai is fastened to the foot-end of the pole, providing a loop that extends a few inches past her heel. Another loop is tied to the harness on her ankle. The tail of the ankle harness gets threaded through the pole loop, then back to the ankle loop to form a zig-zag pulley system.

In theory, the system should push upwards on the hip and pull down at the ankle, creating traction to counteract the muscle tension.

Honestly, it's really freaking clever. Sakura kinda wishes she had paper to take notes on.

Pakkun isn't strong enough to pull effectively, and Sakura can't pull down and away from her own foot, so they devise a makeshift winch by looping the rope around one of the basalt spears. At some point, Pakkun goes off to steal clothing from the dead nuke-nin, which gets tossed on the coals to provide more light. Sakura should maybe feel uncomfortable about that, but mostly she just wants her leg to hurt less.

Finally, after triple-checking the knots, Sakura takes a deep breath and begins to pull.

And almost stops immediately because *hell no this is so much worse!*

But Pakkun snaps his little teeth at her hands. "Keep going! Kakashi has a very classic, straight nose!"

Sakura blinks at the pug, stunned, before she grips the rope with renewed fervor.

"Shannaro!"

With every hand-over-hand pull, Pakkun offers up a morsel of information. Sakura learns that Kakashi-sensei has a scar on his right cheek, and a beauty mark on the left side of his chin.

Apparently, his jaw is handsomely sharp, and he even has a *tongue piercing.*

Like. What?!

“He also has—”

But whatever else sensei has is lost to the tidal wave of relief that crashes over Sakura as the shattered ends of her femur are realigned, like two puzzle pieces fitting back together. It’s not the complete dissolution of pain, because of course not, *comminuted fracture hello,* but it is so, *so* much better that Sakura immediately begins to cry.

It’s like her brain has space to *think* again, she can hear more than ringing and white noise, she can form thoughts beyond *gods please kill me now.*

Pakkun moves quickly to hold the tail in place by the pole loop so Sakura can tie it off, solidifying the splint.

Almost as soon as she leans back against the stone, exhaustion crashes hard and fast over Sakura, and her eyelids begin to droop. The pain, so pale in comparison to before, is no longer enough to keep her awake in the face of such soul-deep weariness.

“Pakkun-sensei,” she mumbles, head already dipping to her chest. “Gonna…nap…for a minute…”

And then she’s out.

Some indeterminate (to Sakura, anyway) time later, she wakes again. The throbbing in her leg is a constant drum of pain, but still leagues more manageable than before. Her right hand is almost completely numb and hot to the touch, which she chooses to ignore.

Sakura finds Pakkun laying down a few feet away from her, his paws crossed all politely.

“How long was I out?” she asks muzzily.

“About an hour,” he responds. Then he points to something between them. “Check it out, I scrounged us up some grub.”

Sakura looks, and sure enough, there are two packets of rations. It’s the simplest and cheapest kind, tasteless, high-calorie bricks of indistinguishable origin, but food is food. There’s a waterskin too, which is ultimately what she grabs for first. It’s about two-thirds full.

Sakura has the waterskin halfway to her lips when she freezes. “Wait,” she says slowly, realization creeping in. “Did you take these from those nuke-nin?”

Pakkun shrugs, already gnawing on one of the ration bars. “Not like they’re gonna use ‘em.”

“Yeah sure, but–”

“Sakura. Eat the damn food.”

The words jolt Sakura back into a memory, of tussling with her blond teammate in the grass, of a sunny afternoon and safety. She wants that again, wants it so, *so* badly.

She eats the food. And if she cries into her ration bar, *screw you.*

After they finish, Sakura leans back against the stone with a huff. “So, what now?”

Pakkun sighs. “We wait until your chakra replenishes a decent bit, and then we figure out how the hell to get out of here.”

The genin frowns. She’d been hoping for a bit more of an ambitious plan than that, and informs him of such.

He frowns back, which would be a funny expression on his little doggy lips if it didn’t stir up such dread in her belly. “Unless you have

an earth manipulation technique that you've been hiding, we've got no choice but to hoof it back the way we came."

Sakura's hands twist anxiously in her lap. "That seems dangerous," she says.

"It is," he agrees.

"What if…what if they come to us, first?" she asks next, a bolt of fear running through her body.

It's not a *"what if,"* she realizes, it's a *"when."* Abe Kennichi will figure out something is wrong when his mercenaries don't return, and will no doubt send other cronies out looking. It's not like her team had time to cover their tracks, either.

It occurs to Sakura now, that she might die here.

And it's not like she hadn't already had this thought, digested it, accepted it. Hell, she invited that blow to her leg as a suicide play, figuring she could take him down with her, and it worked.

But there's a difference between accepting death in the heat of the moment, when the adrenaline blurs the details, when it will come fast and sure and limit suffering.

Accepting a slow crawl towards death is another thing entirely.

"They might," he allows. "If that happens, we'll fight like hell."

Sakura merely hums in response to that, her brain already whirring with the possibilities. Would they be killed outright? Or worse, captured?

Then something occurs to her, and she asks, "Can you dispel your own summoning?"

He nods slowly.

“Where do you go?”

He begins to scratch behind one ear with a rear paw. “Kakashi’s apartment.”

Her heart skips a beat. “Konoha?” she says, a little dumbly, because *duh* Kakashi-sensei’s apartment is in Konoha. “What if you go back, you could tell someone where we—well, I, at that point—am!”

He scratches for another moment, before stopping with a sigh. “I thought about that,” he admits. “But traveling here takes at least a full day. Even if they send an alert by messenger hawk to one of the patrol stations, that will probably take half a day.”

Pakkun’s expression is grim. With very little hope still lingering, Sakura tries, “Radio…?”

He shakes his head. “We don’t have any long-range communication towers out this far from the village borders. They were destroyed as part of the Third Shinobi War treaty.”

Sakura would stamp her foot in frustration if it wouldn’t cause her to black out from agony. “I refuse to believe there isn’t *something* out here that could be used,” she argues. “For the covert operatives or whatever.”

“Sure,” he agrees. “But those things are only authorized for top-secret, extremely high-priority missions. You…” He trails off, looking awkward.

Sakura’s mood sours even further, if that were possible. “...don’t qualify,” she finishes.

“To be clear, Kakashi would do *anything* to bring you back, including starting a war,” Pakkun says, a little wryly. “But we have no idea how long he’ll be out for. Whatever that poison was, it did a number on him.”

Sakura sighs despondently, slumping back against the stone spear. Things are not looking good. Annoyingly, her eyes start to well with tears.

With a wobbling lip, she mumbles, “If stuff gets… *bad,* like someone’s coming for us, you gotta promise you’ll go home.” Then she offers him a teary smile. “No point in both of us dying.”

“I won’t promise you that,” the pug replies honestly. “But I will do everything in my power to get us *both* home safely.”

Sakura eyes Pakkun for a moment, unsatisfied with that response, but too tired to argue about it right now. If things get sketchy, they can revisit, she supposes, and finds her eyelids drooping again.

She naps for another two hours, and is disappointed and anxious to find upon waking that her chakra has barely replenished itself at all.

“You’re badly injured, underfed, and I doubt whatever sleep you’re getting is very restful,” Pakkun explains in response to her worries. “You’re probably recovering at twenty or thirty percent of your usual speed.”

Which is fine and all because it makes sense, but doesn’t make the reality of the situation any less anxiety-inducing. Every minute, every *second* they spend in this cave is another moment spent as sitting ducks. If her (admittedly questionable) mental math/internal clock is right, it’s been around eight hours since she split up with her team. Meaning they’re at *most* a third of the way home (assuming they’re traveling full speed, nonstop) but that’s plenty of time for Abe to grow suspicious.

The odds are increasingly not in their favor.

Time continues to crawl by at a glacial pace, and Sakura continues to fade in and out of a restless sleep. Pakkun is a watchful guardian and comforts her as much as he can. He even digs a small latrine for her to use, a little ways away, when nature comes calling.

“This makes us brothers, right?” Sakura wheezes after she drags herself back to her basalt spear. Her dignity has long since perished, and she poses the question with only moderate cynicism.

Pakkun snorts. “Something like that.”

At some point, he asks her about the two men she fought. “Are you…alright?” Pakkun asks, head tilting to one side. “I’ll be honest, I’ve seen much more hardened shinobi have stronger reactions to easier kills.”

“Oh, I’m not okay at all,” Sakura says, which is the absolute truth. “The second I have a chance I’m gonna have a full meltdown, but there’s no room for it in my brain right now.”

It’s like the memories are behind foggy glass, the muffled words of a conversation a room over. If she tries to look directly at it, it skitters away, like something in a dream. But that’s only a matter of time, Sakura is sure of it.

“Damn,” Pakkun blinks. “That’s some ANBU-level compartmentalization, pup.”

They leave it at that.

At the eighteen hour (give or take) mark, Sakura wakes to a feeling of wrongness.

“Pakkun,” she says, forgetting proper honorifics in her urgency. “Something’s wrong with my leg.”

The pug looks at her strangely. “Yes,” he says slowly, like she’s stupid. “It’s broken.”

Fear shortens the fuse of Sakura’s temper and she bares her teeth in blatant disrespect. “No, you—ugh! I mean *more* wrong.”

Touching her thigh hesitantly with light fingertips, she continues, “The pain is worse and it feels…I don’t know, wooden? And look, it’s so

pale!”

He immediately crowds her to look, and sucks in a short breath. “Shit,” he growls. “I think this might be compartment syndrome.”

Sakura grips the hem of her haori. “What’s that? Is it bad?”

“I’m fuzzy on the specifics, but I’ve seen it after broken limbs before,” Pakkun growls, beginning to pace. “All I know is that you need surgery, and *soon.”*

Sakura swallows, fingers twisting more and more into the red fabric. “...Can it be fatal?”

He glances at her but says nothing, which is an answer in and of itself.

Sakura doesn’t fall asleep again after that. Instead, she sits quietly and begins to construct a series of notes in her head. The things she’d like to say to the people she loves.

The things she probably won’t get to say.

She also, secretly, fiddles around with using chakra to dull the aching, slowly worsening pain in her leg.

Is it wise? No.

Could it cause more damage? Certainly.

Does that matter, given the increasing likelihood of her not surviving this? Debatable.

Sakura learned a lot about nerves, receptors and neurotransmitters when she first began to develop her chakra-cilia trick. The cilia discharge electrical impulses to the cochlear nerve, which then transmits these as signals to the brain. Sight works in a similar way, where impulses from the retinas are transmitted by the optic nerve to the brain.

Vibrations are the language of the cochlear nerve, and photons the language of the optic. What could be the language of pain?

Surely it's multilingual, she thinks wryly. Pain receptors react to mechanical, thermal, *and* chemical signals. Presumably, different types of pain receptors react to different types of stimuli…in this case, she's probably dealing with the mechanoreceptors.

Using chakra to mimic the effects of narcotic pain medication is one option, she muses, but the same reservations that she had about inducing sweat apply here, too. Using chakra on her brain, without proper training, just seems unwise.

She *could* try blocking the signal from the receptors to her spinal cord, like a local anesthetic. Kondo-san had used one on Sasuke when doing that joint load test back in Wave, and Sakura's brain faithfully recalls that it worked by prolonging the inactivation of sodium channels in the neuronal cell membrane. If blocked enough, the voltage-gated channels won't open, and an action-potential won't be propagated.

No action potential, no pain.

Heck, she could probably skip the spinal cord completely, and just apply chakra as a high-volume topical analgesic.

No pain, no gain, Sakura thinks to herself. *Well, actually hopefully no pain and all gain, but whatever.*

The genin is careful with her chakra, calling upon only the tiniest, most microscopic amount, like she'd done with the sweat induction. She focuses the chakra to her thigh, imagining thousands of tiny doors slamming shut with a NO ENTRY sign hung on the front, and then—

The relief is instant, and Sakura feels her body relax like a puppet with the strings cut. She lets the chakra wipe out the pain completely,

basking in those few, short glorious moments, before beginning to dial it back.

Pain is a signal, after all. She doesn't need to accidentally worsen her injury by being totally ignorant to it.

Then again, she thinks dourly. *This is probably it, so…*

She cranks the chakra back up.

If Pakkun can smell her chakra usage, he doesn't comment on it. She watches him for a moment, letting her head clear a bit more in the absence of agony.

"Hey Pakkun-sensei," she starts, voice shakier than she'd like. "I've got some messages I'd like you to pass along to some people."

He looks at her, expression severe. "Tell 'em yourself when we get back," he responds, before curling up into a ball, facing away from her with a huff.

"Pakkun," she repeats, and maybe it's the weariness in her voice, or the pain, but after a moment the pug sighs and turns back around.

"Fine," he grumbles. "But this is just practice for when you tell them, got it?"

Sakura's smile is wan. "Got it."

---

oooope not quite outta the woods yet, kiddo!

thanks for reading! comments are very motivating for my writing :)

next time: time is running out for sakura and pakkun. it's do or die! ALSO...a special, non-sakura POV section.

To open a door

Chapter 14: To open a door

---

first, THANK YOU so much for all of your kind comments on the last chapter. and we broke 100k views!!! that's fully insane, and i am so grateful. you guys are seriously the best. i would apologize for leaving a cliff-hanger last time...but it's pretty fun to see everyone's reactions haha.

i'm glad you all enjoyed sakura's ingenuity and tenacity. it's a fun way to solve problems as a writer! there is also more of my own chakra lore in this chapter—with a little demon slayer homage—which i hope you all like.

i love to read y'all's predictions on what's going to happen. some of you were spot on.

without further ado...enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Konoha General Hospital, Recovery Unit.

Might Gai is many things.

If you were to ask somebody else, the first word they may come up with is *eccentric.* A less charitable observer might say *bizarre,* or *absurd.*

A friend would call him *passionate.* An enemy would call him *dangerous.*

From his students, *kind, attentive,* and perhaps *a little weird.* To Konoha, he is *loyal.*

Might Gai is indeed many things, but there is one thing he is most certainly not.

Might Gai is not a liar.

So when his closest friend of many years—most of his life, truly—wakes in a hospital bed, pale and weak and barely pulled from the brink of death from poison, and he demands *“where are my kids"*—

—Despite the fact that Kakashi is barely strong enough to stand, despite the fact that protocol puts this man’s safety leagues above that of his female student, despite the fact that Gai knows he’s inviting a shitstorm—

—Gai does not lie.

To his credit, Gai attempts to approach the situation with the most tact and care possible. Frankly, that’s as much for him as it is for anyone else—once Kakashi enters a *bite first, ask questions later* mode, he’s difficult to pull out of it.

“Gai,” Kakashi says again, voice like flint as he throws the covers off of his hospital bed. “Where are my *kids.”*

It’s not a question, not even a demand. It is merely the verbally expressed expectation of cooperation. It is also testament to his status as an elite ninja that Kakashi is capable of emitting such a powerful killing intent despite standing on legs wobblier than that of a newborn foal.

“Easy, my friend,” Gai says, approaching the bed with cautious steps. “You need to be careful with that—”

But the silver-haired man pays him no mind, ripping off cables and tubes with total abandon. He even rips off his hospital scrubs shirt, which seems a bit unnecessary.

“—IV,” Gai finishes a little lamely.

“Gai, I won’t ask again,” Kakashi growls, canines gnashing as he turns to the lycra-clad man. Gai has seen Kakashi’s face plenty of times, but it can still be a little jarring, given that it's the exception rather than the rule.

The recent changes in his friend become abruptly more obvious now, and Gai is floored for a moment at just how much more *healthy* his friend has become since having his eye fixed. They’ve always been of a height, but up until recently Gai has been the more overtly muscular of the two. Now, as Kakashi seethes before him, muscles bulging and veins pulsating in fury, he’s not so sure.

“Naruto and Sasuke are in this hospital, both recovering from fairly extreme cases of exhaustion,” Gai reports. “It seems they had transported you and a civilian woman for quite a long ways without resting.”

Kakashi’s shoulders relax, but only minutely. “And Sakura?”

Gai sighs internally. This is where it will get tricky.

“I’m afraid the whereabouts of Sakura are unknown at this time,” Gai responds, trying not to let his own fear seep into the words. His worry about the intrepid young girl is not what is important right now.

He watches Kakashi digest that for a moment, and it’s only Gai’s faster-than-lightning reflexes that allow him to catch the man’s wrist before he bolts.

“Kakashi,” he murmurs, voice equal parts a plea and a warning. “A recovery team has been dispatched to the area. You are too weak to —"

“Politely, fuck you,” Kakashi says flatly, yanking his arm away in a crisp movement. “So they know where she is?”

Gai hesitates. “Not precisely, but the recovery team includes a tracker—"

“I’m a better tracker,” Kakashi interrupts dismissively. “Pakkun—"

Then oddly, Kakashi stops, eyes widening before they dart upwards, as if he’s thinking hard about something. “Was Pakkun with the boys?” he asks, something akin to hope in his voice.

“He was not,” Gai answers, surprised when Kakashi lets out a relieved huff, his shoulders sagging.

“Good,” he says. “I can sense that his summoning is still active. If he isn’t here, that means he’s with Sakura.”

For the first time since his dearest friend was dragged pale and nearly pulseless into this hospital several hours ago, Gai feels his spirits lift somewhat.

“I am so very glad to hear that! Now—"

Kakashi makes another attempt at escaping, this time through the window, but Gai knows him better than anybody and saw that coming from a mile away. As it is, Kakashi’s chest merely bounces off of the iron bar of Gai’s arm, thrown in front of the glass.

Kakashi doesn’t yield an inch, just turns to level Gai with a cold glare. “I’m disappointed, Gai,” he says venomously. “That you would value village protocol over the life of my student.”

“Kakashi,” Gai murmurs, a mixture of hurt and exasperation. The man knows just as well as he does how completely untrue that is, but a feral Hatake is a mean one. When a wolf bites, it aims to break bones, he’s learned.

Regardless, Gai continues, “If you go dashing off alone to her rescue and pass out in the middle of gods-know-where from complications of your recovery, then you’re of no help to the young Sakura at all.” His voice is firm, but there’s a kindness in there too. “You know this, my friend.”

Kakashi opens his mouth to respond, but instead he freezes, eyes widening. “...Pakkun dispelled the summon,” he says flatly.

Dread pools heavy and sudden and ice-cold in Gai’s chest. Kakashi steps away from the window, biting into his thumb and slamming a palm onto the floor before the other jounin can utter a word. A *pop!* and puff of smoke heralds the arrival of Kakashi’s oldest and most trusted canine companion.

“Goodness, Pakkun, you look most unyouthful!” Gai gasps reflexively at what he sees, horrified by the battered and charred state of the animal.

The pug ignores him entirely, focusing only on Kakashi. “Hey boss,” he greets, though the words are muffled by the scroll in his teeth. “Glad you’re not dead.”

A little bit earlier, a long ways away…

“First is my parents,” Sakura begins.

(Thankfully, she doesn’t have that many friends, so there aren’t too many messages for Pakkun to remember.)

“I’d like you to tell them that I love being their daughter,” she says carefully. “And that I’m the luckiest girl alive to have such kind and funny parents. And, um, remind my dad to take his high blood pressure medication. And tell my mom she should tell *her* mom to go pound sand if she sends any more mean letters.”

Pakkun nods, his expression solemn.

“Next is Uncle Musashi. Tell him that some of my best memories are eating carrots straight from the dirt from his farm. And he should finally ask that guy out, the one he’s been in love with for like five years.”

Sakura takes a moment to just breathe, because she's starting to sob, and this will take *way* longer if she bawls the whole time. After wiping her nose on her haori, Sakura forges on.

"Um, there's a girl, Yamanaka Ino. Please tell her that I only became the shinobi I am today because of her friendship. She saved me. Tell her she's the prettiest girl I ever met and that I know she's gonna be amazing some day. I mean, she already is, but she'll be even more amazing. Then call her a pig because she's still technically my rival."

Pakkun's face is a little more confused this time, but he still nods.

"Lee…tell Lee that he's the best eternal rival a girl could ask for, and that he should never stop seeking greatness. Tell him I admire how authentically he lives his life. Also, I think he'd make a great teacher, so he should think about that when he becomes a jounin."

Sakura swallows and her throat clicks. All that's left is her team.

I never got to confess to Sasuke, Sakura realizes with a pang of gut-churning regret. Even if she's more confused now about her feelings regarding the boy, she still would like to have told him. To have that moment, to live that dream. But the chance has passed, the door closed.

"Tell Sasuke that I hope he finds happiness," she says slowly, the thoughts only crystallizing as they leave her mouth. "Like, *true* happiness, not just the barest-absence-of-crushing-loneliness. Tell him he's the hardest working person I know, and I admire that a lot. People call him a genius, and I do think he's smart, but I know he works his butt off, too. Tell him I think he should get a cat, because I think he'd get along with one, and I think it's easier to get up in the morning when someone is relying on you, you know?"

It's not everything she wants to say to the boy, but it's enough.

"And Naruto…oh man, he's gonna be so mad about all this," Sakura chuckles through her tears. "Tell him to eat his vegetables, and to

make sure he keeps his fingers curled when he's chopping garlic. Tell him that I'm grateful he was still willing to be my friend, even after I treated him poorly for so long. Tell him I loved those stupid samurai movies. Tell him there's not a single doubt in my mind that he'll become Hokage, and that he'll be a great one. Then you gotta fist-bump him, like this." She demonstrates their secret handshake.

It takes several minutes this time, to recompose herself, but Sakura manages it eventually.

Just one left.

"The most important thing," Sakura begins, and she grabs Pakkun's paw so he knows how serious she is. "The most important thing is that you have to tell Kakashi-sensei that this *isn't his fault."*

Pakkun's expression begins to crumple in true anguish at that, and Sakura has to keep talking right now or she'll never finish because she'll be crying way too hard.

"He's gonna blame himself, but he's wrong. It was my choice to become a shinobi. It was my suggestion that we continue on with this mission, and it was me who chose to stay behind. It's not his fault. You hear me? It's *not his fault.* "

"I hear you," Pakkun croaks.

She nods. "Good."

Then, she thinks for a moment, trying to figure out exactly what else she wants to say. "Tell him," Sakura swallows heavily. "Tell Kakashi-sensei he's actually a really good teacher, even if he doesn't think so. He's a total weirdo obviously, but I don't think there's anything wrong with that. His punctuality could use some work, though."

Pakkun chuckles gruffly at that.

“But tell sensei that despite all that, I’m selfishly glad he failed all of his other teams, because it means I got to be his student. I’ve learned so much from him, I’ve *grown* so much.” Her voice hitches. “I might not have accomplished a lot in my life, but for what I’ve done, I *am* proud.”

And thus both human and canine began to bawl. The gross, heaving, coughing cries echo for several long minutes throughout the cavern. Pakkun’s sobs are interspersed with heartbreaking, high-pitched whines, which only makes Sakura cry harder. It’s not a pretty sight.

She hugs him tight. “And give the rest of the ninken my love,” she adds, wiping her nose on the little vest he wears, and he doesn’t even complain about it.

They sit in relative silence for a few moments, broken up by the odd sniffle. The bawling had caused Sakura’s focus to waver, which meant the pain in her leg came roaring back, but in a way, it’s grounding. It’s a tangible problem to confront, rather than the somewhat abstract concept of her imminent death.

Sakura strokes Pakkun’s nose with a finger, humming. “Tell me about being a summon,” she requests. A distraction would be nice, from the hunger and thirst and overall discomfort.

And he does. Sakura learns that they all began as regular dogs, and Kakashi had raised them all from puppyhood, starting with Pakkun when the man was but five years old.

“Wait,” Sakura interrupts. “Doesn’t that mean you’re like…twenty years old?” He barely looks a day over…well, whatever middle-agedness looks like in pugs!

“Yup,” Pakkun nods. “We’ll all live about as long as Kakashi. One effect of signing a contract is what’s called *transference.* Abilities and traits become shared between the summon and summoner. It’s why we can talk, and use chakra. In return, he gets an enhanced sense of smell, among other things.”

“Whoa,” Sakura breathes, fascinated.

“It’s said that the legendary summons–the ones that grow to be bigger than buildings–are the descendants of the first contracted animals. Over time, as their abilities became greater, they grew tired of being controlled by humans. They used their powers to create their own worlds and left this plane. Now, only a select few may hold contracts with those creatures, which are considered *mangetsu* - ranked summons.”

“Like the sannin,” Sakura murmurs.

“Like the sannin,” Pakkun agrees. “Contracts are often passed down within families. Many clans have bred summons for generations, resulting in lower-ranked but still very powerful creatures. They reside within this plane and are either *jōgen* or *kagen* ranked, depending on chakra and skill-level.”

Full moon, three-quarter moon, and half moon, Sakura recites to herself. It's an unorthodox ranking system, but definitely suits a concept as bizarre as summoning giant animals from a different freaking dimension.

“What are you guys?” Sakura inquires curiously. “Kagen…?”

Pakkun snorts. “Naw,” he waves a paw. “We’re first generation summons, so we don’t even come close to qualifying. Most summons don’t get a rank.”

Sakura nods, digesting all of that. It makes sense.

“The Hatake actually hold a contract with wolves,” Pakkun continues. “Mangetsu rank. But I’m not sure Kakashi ever signed it.”

Sakura’s eyes just about pop out of her head. “Why?!”

The little pug’s expression becomes drawn. “...complicated family matters,” is all he says.

He looks sad, so Sakura doesn't press. There's an awkward moment of silence, before Pakkun shakes himself as if he's trying to rid his fur of water.

"Help me get this vest off," he says, turning to present his back to Sakura. "I'll show you something interesting."

Curious, Sakura does so, and then lays it inside-up on the ground when instructed. To her surprise, there's a cluster of characters in the middle. *A seal of some sort?*

Pakkun taps the characters with one paw, and after a muted *pop!* and a cloud of smoke, a small scroll appears.

"This is our summoning contract," Pakkun explains. "Well, a copy of it, but a live one."

"A *live* copy?"

"Means that anything that gets written on this or any of the other copies–each ninken has one, and the boss–appears on the others. It's a technique called *Infinite Paper Mirrors,* Kakashi picked it up from some Ame-nin lady way back in the day. For a non-ranked summon, this functions as my identifying documents. Like a passport."

"That technique would be handy for long-distance communication," Sakura says almost absently, peering curiously at the scroll. "Can I see the inside?"

"Sure," Pakkun says, and uses a paw to unroll the scroll a bit.

She studies it, and is surprised to find the document actually formatted like a regular contract, with starting lines like "here the undersigned shall," and "in consideration of the provisions contained within," and so forth. The signature section is where it gets a little messy, which is a series of puppy-sized paw-prints and Kakashi's name scribbled next to each one. There are still multiple blank lines

left, indicating the potential for more signatures. A diamond with cross hatches in it—the Hatake crest, she presumes—sits at the top of the document.

Then, an idea strikes Sakura.

“Pakkun-sensei,” Sakura begins, fingers hovering over the ink as she tries to keep the shakiness in her voice under control. “Would it be possible…for *me* to sign it?”

He looks at her in confusion, but nods. “I would be fine with you holding our contract.”

But Sakura is already shaking her head. “No, not as a summoner,” she corrects. “As a *summon.”*

Understanding crosses his face in a bolt. “I…I’m not sure, but I don’t see why not.”

Sakura takes the scroll in her hands now, scouring the blocks of text for any indication that the summon is required to be an actual, y’know, *dog,* but finds nothing. All of the terms are vague, like “contract holder,” and “the summoned party.”

“How do you sign it?” she asks, hope taking root in her belly. *This might actually work.*

“You have to activate it with chakra and then sign your name in blood,” he says, getting up in her space so he can peer at the contents too. “Then Kakashi has to do the same.”

“Oh,” Sakura deflates, the hopeful embers in her chest summarily flattened. “Well, that won’t work because he’s not here.”

But Pakkun is still studying the scroll closely. “True, but I have a way of getting back to him,” he counters.

The genin perks up again. “You’re right! I could sign in, you go back, get him to sign it and then…” she trails off, as if speaking it might

break the spell of possibility.

“Then you could be summoned all the way back home,” he finishes.

It almost seems too good to be true, so Sakura tries to keep a reasonable lid on her optimism. “Wait. Are there…laws against this kind of thing?” she wonders.

Almost certainly, right? If transference works between people, that would function as a way of combining and increasing powers without having to procreate. Like a cheat code in a game.

But Pakkun waves a dismissive paw. “Probably, but Kakashi won’t care, and he’s powerful enough that very few would be foolish enough to bother him about it.” Then he thinks for a moment. “Well, if you were a member of a clan, there might be a bigger stink, but as it is…”

Sakura frowns. Neither the evident ease with which Konoha law can be ignored nor the reminder of her inferior birth is very comforting to hear, even if they’re both technically working in her favor right now.

“Don’t worry about it, let’s focus on getting this to work for now,” Pakkun says, and Sakura nods.

They read over it together twice, and then Sakura lays it flat on the ground beside her.

“Okay, how do I activate it?” she asks, trepidation bubbling in her stomach.

That gives Pakkun pause. “Oh, erm…” he squints in thought. “It’s a series of hand-seals, I think five? I’m not exactly sure which.”

Sakura can’t help the way she slumps in disappointment. “There’s no way I can reverse-engineer a whole series,” she despairs. *“Maybe* if I knew what to start with, but…”

Sure, they had Academy several lessons on the hand seals, about their meaning, which elemental releases they tend to correspond with. But the associated concepts are just that—*conceptual associations,* words and ideas that can make sense to a human, rather than literal, practical meaning. As far as Sakura can understand, it's like using a metaphor to describe something. It helps a user to shape their chakra into a technique, but it's not like a math equation where she can just solve for *X.*

"I know there's the dog seal in there somewhere," he offers. "And I think the first seal is like this?" He presses his front paws pads-together, with his toes pointed down.

Sakura squints for a moment, before adopting a boar seal. "This?"

He nods excitedly. "Yes, that one!"

Sakura considers this. "Do you think if I went through all of the hand seals, you could recognize which ones he used?"

But Pakkun is already shaking his head in the negative. "Kakashi goes through them too fast for me to see," he says apologetically.

They both sit back, a morose silence settling over the pair.

In a way, my chaka control is biting me in the butt, the genin thinks wryly. Perhaps if she had to rely on hand seals more to mold her chakra, she'd have a deeper understanding of them, and better instincts.

"Well, may as well try," Sakura shrugs. She lays the scroll (carefully, *very* carefully) on her lap and calls upon the little flickery pool of chakra in her chest. She makes the boar seal, letting the chakra take shape, before adopting the dog seal. It's slow going, because her right hand is so numb and clumsy.

To her complete and utter surprise, the crest at the top of the scroll begins to glow. One side of the diamond lights up, followed by

another. She and Pakkun stare in total awe for a moment before she releases the sign.

The glowing disappears.

“Okay…” Sakura says slowly. Then, to test a theory, she does boar, followed by hare.

Only one side of the diamond begins to glow.

“It seems like the crest needs to be fully lit up,” she says, rubbing her chin in thought. “Like the cotter pins in a lock. You said five signs, right? So maybe four for the sides, one for the cross-hatches?”

“That would make sense to me,” Pakkun agrees.

“Then maybe I can just run through all of the seals and see what works,” Sakura says, excitement creeping into her voice.

Except…

Except that definitely drew upon her chakra, and it wasn’t a small amount. With a flinch, Sakura realizes she’s suddenly much more tired than she felt just moments ago. *Of course it takes a lot of chakra to activate a summoning scroll, you dummy,* she berates herself. If it were easy, more people would have them.

She takes stock of her chakra levels for a moment. She’s got enough left for…two, *maybe* three more tries. Less if the drain increases as more seals are done in sequence.

That’s barely enough for the three hand signs that remain, with effectively no wiggle room for mistakes. So brute forcing it won’t work.

“I’m gonna have to think this through,” Sakura announces. “And I do my best thinking out loud, so…sit tight, I guess.”

If only she could get up and pace, which helps get her brain juices flowing. And fidgeting is difficult because her right hand is slowly becoming a useless club. *Talk about sub-optimal conditions,* Sakura sighs internally. *But moping won't solve this puzzle!*

"Let's see," she begins. "We've already used boar and dog, and it's very rare that a series this short would have any repeats, so they're off the table. That leaves ten remaining."

"Boar is all about combustive force, explosive power. Taking down obstacles. In a pretty big contrast, dog is used with a lot of water release techniques. It signifies change and flexibility, the ability to adapt. In sequence, that speaks to me like…opening a door," Sakura mumbles. "Or rather, *making* a door, perhaps where doors don't usually exist."

She hums, head tilting to one side. "I am going to make a fairly ambitious assumption that the activation seals are at least moderately reflective of the technique itself. Considering this is all about moving a creature across the space-time dimension, creating a door fits."

(Yes, Sakura is aware that's kind of circular logic, but whatever!)

Therefore, the next step is to go *through* the door. In a word, travel. Maybe horse, because they can run for long distances. No, it's gotta be—

"Bird!" Sakura cries, feeling certain of her answer. "Okay, so, boar, dog, bird…opening a door and walking through, then what…"

What follows after going through the door? *Closing* the door, right? Maybe the next two signs are about that. If boar-dog/explosive-change is open, then is the opposite closing? Peaceful-sameness?

"Peaceful sameness…" she mutters. Dragon is out, as it represents extreme power, almost divine in nature, and is typically paired with high-level elemental releases. Rat, often used as a multiplicative

element and reflecting the power of *many,* also doesn't really fit. Hare is for speed, snake for stealth and lethality. The ferocity of tiger and the durability of ox feel less wrong, but still not quite right.

Then again…maybe dragon does make sense? Sakura wonders, beginning to second-guess herself. After all, the genesis of contracts, the legendary summons…these are some pretty godly elements.

Perhaps boar, dog, bird, dragon, then…ram, for stillness?

Before she can think better of it, Sakura summons her chakra and moves carefully through those signs. One side of the crest lights up, then two, then three…!

But no more.

"Dammit," Sakura curses, flopping back against the stone spear in exhaustion as the inked diamond flickers before going dark.

Sure enough, getting the third seal correct used up more of her chakra than before. The next attempt will be her last.

If not the celestial dragon, then what? The endurance of horse? Maybe ram is actually the fourth seal?

"Doubt it," Sakura mutters to herself. Ram is frequently the last seal in a series, though she can't exactly recall why. Statistically, it's just much more likely to be the fifth. Besides, in this case, it still fits into her *peaceful stillness* idea.

That leaves monkey.

The monkey seal is considered almost a wildcard. It's not associated with any elements, nor with any specific augmentation. It's like a secret ingredient, you only know it worked after you've tasted the final product. In a way, that's not unlike the process of *being* summoned–presumably, the creatures have no idea where they're about to end up. It's a mystery, until they've already arrived.

The acceptance of things you cannot change.

Sakura takes a deep breath, and—

Boar, dog, bird, monkey, ram!

The drain on her chakra is immediate and immense, but that hardly matters; for the crest lights up in its entirety. One side, then two, three, four, finally followed by the cross-hatches in the middle. Pakkun yips in excitement as the whole scroll seems to take on a new life, almost levitating with the power.

“Well done, pup! Now, sign your name!” Pakkun barks.

Sakura wastes no time in chomping down onto her thumb, even though she’s lightheaded from the severe and sudden depletion of chakra. With a shaky hand, she paints her name in strokes of crimson.

However, Sakura finds herself jerking away mid-character when the drain on her chakra continues, bringing her to the brink of total emptiness. *Oh no,* she thinks in despair. *It must need chakra during the signing, too!*

Pakkun nips at her hand. “What’re you stallin’ for, c’mon!”

“I don’t have enough chakra,” she says miserably, nauseated and dizzy from the sensation of being stripped almost bare.

“You gotta try—”

“Pakkun!” she cuts him off, a little harshly. “I don’t have enough. If I keep going, I’ll run out completely.”

He sits back, desolation writ large across his face. The scroll seems to shudder for a moment, before the light fades once more. Her half-written name vanishes without a trace.

“Dammit,” Sakura sobs, pounding the earth with her fists. “Dammit, dammit, *dammit!”*

I’m going to die here.

Her heart feels like it’s beating too fast and too slow at the same time, and Sakura clutches at her chest as she doubles over, abruptly totally out of breath. The world is suddenly fuzzy, her lungs far too small to handle the pressure inside, and she’s shivering, but despite the ice in her veins it’s like she’s wearing a turtleneck on a hot summer night. Even Sakura’s limbs feel queasy, every inch of her body *wrong, wrong, wrong.*

This is a panic attack, she realizes in some distant, echoing corner of her brain.

Her fingers continue to scrabble at her chest, clawing at the fabric. In her panic, she sends *Kuzushi no ri* tumbling to the ground, and her fingers get tangled in something around her neck.

With a howl, Sakura rips the offending item from her throat. She’s about to pitch it into the dark shadows of the cavern when suddenly, a memory flashes in her mind, of turning something over in her hands and demanding *“What is it?”*

“A last resort,” Zabuza had grinned at her nastily.

Presently, Sakura blinks, frozen mid-throw. Chest still heaving and hands trembling, she cradles the necklace close. But hope does not stir in her chest this time.

Who am I kidding, she thinks numbly. *As if a nuke-nin would give someone like me something useful. And as if someone like me could figure it out, regardless.*

A helpless rage bubbles up in Sakura and she squeezes the blue, scale-like pendant *hard.* The razor-sharp edges bite into her already raw palm, slicing it open, but she welcomes the burn.

Pakkun sighs, and headbutts her shoulder gently. “Pup, please stop.”

Sakura doesn't’ respond, merely squeezes the pendant harder when suddenly—

The scent of briny saltwater floods her nose.

Pakkun must smell it too, because he rears back in surprise, nostrils flaring. The source, Sakura realizes quickly, is the pendant. And suddenly, it’s not just the scent of brine, but ozone, moss, wet soil, soot, oily river mud, *fire*— Sakura’s hand begins to burn, and it’s not from the injuries.

The pendant is aglow with chakra, a boiling mass of pure energy in her palm. It eagerly steals into her body unbeckoned, like heat chasing equilibrium. The firehose of power makes her squeak as it lights up her veins and sears into her heart-center.

Holy moly! Sakura gasps, overwhelmed by the abrupt 180 of *almost empty* to *overflowing.* She’s never had this much chakra in her *life.* Just when she’s certain she’s going to burst, it slows, and there’s a bizarre yet distinct aura of satisfaction coming from the pendant, as if it’s alive and very pleased with what it just did.

She turns to Pakkun, who’s staring at the pendant wide-eyed. “What the hell is *that?”* he demands.

“I dunno,” Sakura shakes her head, a disbelieving smile on her face and feeling absurdly giddy, discomfort blotted out by the sensation of thrumming power. “But I think I can sign that contract now!”

And she does, one hand clutching the pendant as the other signs her name. The characters are clumsy courtesy of her messed-up right arm and the fact that she hasn’t finger-painted since she was maybe five years old, but it’s legible enough. After she presses a bloody, chakra-laden handprint into the scroll, it glows brighter for a moment before everything settles into the parchment, the crimson darkening to a purplish-black. Sakura waits frozen for a heartbeat, wondering if

she’s supposed to feel different now. Other than the crazy amount of chakra, she just feels like regular old Sakura.

Pakkun carefully rolls the scroll back up before he turns to her.

He hesitates. “If I go, you’ll be alone,” the pug says quietly.

Sakura offers him a reassuring smile. “I know,” she acknowledges. “But we’ve gotta try, right?”

He looks at her for a moment, before he headbutts her shoulder, and Sakura leans down so she can press her forehead against his.

“Thank you, Pakkun-sensei,” she says. “For everything.”

“Brave pup,” he steps away. “You’ll make a worthy member of our pack.”

And then, in a puff of smoke, he’s gone. And Sakura is alone.

With a shaky sigh, she settles back against the spear. Ideally, it will be quick, just minutes even…but Sakura isn’t naïve enough to anticipate that. It’s possible that Kakashi-sensei is still incapacitated, though she dearly hopes not, both for his sake and hers. She takes a moment to tuck *Kuzushi no ri* back into her breast pocket.

It’s terribly quiet in the cavern, just Sakura and the corpses of the two men who were unfortunate enough to be sent after her team. She has a sudden vision then, of their bodies twitching to life, of them clawing their way towards her with sightless eyes, mouths agape in a silent scream. With her leg, she’d be helpless to stop them. Would they tear at her with their teeth, or rip her limb from limb?

Sakura only has a moment to imagine this terrifying scenario when a noise from the tunnel entrance rudely reminds her that the horrors of this life are not so fantastical.

Someone is coming.

The genin arms herself with a kunai, a quiet gasp sucked in through her teeth. Someone is coming, and there's nobody here to help her.

No. No no no no no please no. Sakura's mind spins as she casts about desperately on what to do, but her brain is short circuiting with fear. She's all but defenseless and immobile, too physically exhausted to take advantage of her relatively high chakra levels. The last of her exploding tags were used against the second man, leaving her with nothing but a couple of blades and her bare fists to defend herself with.

Maybe they're an ally? She prays desperately for this to be the case, and funnels chakra into her nose, hoping to smell the familiar scent of moss and old forest and home that a Konoha shinobi might carry. Instead, she is met with the stench of coal slag and burnt metal. *Someone from the mill.*

The sound of nearing conversation echoing down the tunnel causes Sakura to flinch, and tears gather in her eyes. She *can't* let them get to her. Kunoichi classes in the Academy had driven into her again and again that there are a thousand fates worse than death.

She brings the point of the blade to her throat. *They won't take me alive,* she vows.

Then, the strangest thing happens.

Sakura's world *shifts,* like she's suddenly in total freefall, and there's a tugging behind her navel followed by the distinct sensation of leaving her stomach behind. Her ears pop, as if due to a change in pressure, and then everything is a blinding, bright white.

Back in that hospital room in Konoha, just a few minutes ago...

Kakashi's eyes are wide, his expression desperate. "Is Sakura—"

"Alive, yes," Pakkun snaps. "I need you to—"

“Is she—”

“She’s not great but she ain’t dead so shut yer trap and *let me speak!”* Pakkun cuts Kakashi off, uncharacteristically fierce.

Shocked and looking a little cowed, the silver-haired man just nods silently in response. Pakkun drops the scroll he’s carrying and nudges it open with his snout, sending the dowel rolling away to reveal the contents. Gai leans in to peer at it curiously.

“A summoning scroll?” he asks, but is ignored again.

“Sakura is a damn crazy little genius, and figured she could sign our contract as a summon instead of a summoner. Long story short, we’re pretty sure it worked. You just need to sign your end to seal the deal and—”

“And she could be summoned right here in an instant,” Gai finishes, impressed by the cleverness of the solution.

Kakashi is already on his hands and knees over the scroll, sharingan activated to scan it furiously. It’s an impressive show of restraint, to check it over so carefully when he’s clearly not in a very rational state of mind. A poorly executed summoning contract could result in only bringing *part* of Sakura here, however, so it’s well worth the effort.

Kakashi looks it over once, then twice. “Looks perfect,” he says, voice a little faint. “Fuck, that little brat is so goddamn smart.”

His hands fly through the five seals before he uses his still-bleeding thumb to carefully sign his name next to hers. Without being prompted, Gai drops a hand on Kakashi’s shoulder to lend him some chakra. He’s well aware that sealing a contract like this is energy-intensive.

The characters begin to glow, and Sakura’s name lights up next to it. Then, with a crackle of sparks, the blood settles into the paper,

turning a purplish-black as the bond is completed.

Kakashi abandons the scroll the hop into the center of the room, presumably for a bit more space. Gai hangs back this time, squeezes his eyes shut, and sends up a prayer. *Please bring the little one home.*

He can hear the muted slap of a palm against linoleum, then another *pop!*

There's a beat, which seems to stretch into eternity, and Gai's heart is dropping when—

"Sensei…?"

His eyes snap open, hope taking wing in his chest at the sound of that small voice. Could it be…?!

Sure enough, lying before Kakashi is one Haruno Sakura. She's beaten and bloody and clutching a kunai, but she's *alive.* Here in Konoha, and whole.

Well, mostly whole, Gai corrects himself. The contraption on her leg is a little alarming.

"Sakura!" Kakashi cries, cradling her tiny face with shaking hands.

The so-named girl grins, fat tears streaming down her face as she coughs out a wet, relieved giggle.

"Sorry I'm late, sensei," she murmurs. "I got…lost on the road of life."

And then she goes limp.

OOP ANOTHER CLIFF-HANGER well sort of anyways. not quite as bad as the previous two lol.

as always, comments fuel my writing and make my day! i hope you guys liked the chakra/summoning contract lore in this one, i enjoyed coming up with it all.

the next chapter wraps up the tetsugawa arc and sets the scene for the next one, AKA the royal wedding arc! which will feature political intrigue, haruno mebuki backstory, ami redemption side-adventure, everyone wearing fancy outfits, and found-family trope galore. can't wait to share it with you all!

next time: sakura must face the consequences of her choices in tetsugawa.

The mortifying ordeal of being known

Chapter 15: The mortifying ordeal of being known

---

hey everyone! thank you as always for your wonderful kind words. i love how much you all love sakura. i love reading your theories about what will happen. i love you guys!!

my motivation to write has been flagging a bit for the last month, for a handful of reasons, but i'm finally feeling some wind in my sails again. i'm looking forward to sharing more of this story with you all.

and a happy announcement: i can finally retire the "not beta-read" tag! the illustrious and meticulous anxiousgrimalkin offered to brave her way through the typo-trenches of my early-draft writing to bring you all a more polished product. whoohoo!

also...we have officially breached 100k words! goddamn! thank you all for sticking with me this far :) cheers to many more words to come.

please enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When Sakura wakes, she does so with moderate confusion.

For one, her alarm sounds strange—a quiet, repetitive *beep* instead of the cacophonous ringing she usually welcomes a new day to. Furthermore, when she goes to shut her alarm off, her arm doesn’t comply, apparently so tangled in her duvet that it’s immobilized.

“Guh,” Sakura grumbles, squirming in bed. Her sheets feel wrong, scratchy and thin, and she begins to thrash in earnest when it becomes evident her arm is not merely tangled, but bound by

something. She manages to peel her eyelids open despite a sticky crust gluing them shut, and is greeted by an ocean of bright, bright white.

“Easy, kid, you don’t want to get your sling twisted up.”

Sakura freezes, so stunned by the sound of another human voice that her brain spins uselessly for several long seconds, unable to churn out a singular coherent thought. Her thoughts are like molasses, desperate to gallop but restrained to a slow crawl. She straightens enough to crane her neck and sees—

“Kakashi-sensei!”

Sakura’s voice is thin, scratchy from dryness and sleep, but rings with true joy. The great, swooping relief in her belly at the sight of her teacher, slumped rather casually in a crappy plastic chair next to her bed is so great she may cry. In fact, she does.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, stowing away that little orange book.

Sakura swipes messily at her eyes and nose, or *tries* to—but her right arm is so thoroughly bandaged it’s almost comical, and furthermore trussed up in a sling attached to the ceiling. “I’m…” She takes stock for a moment. “I think I feel okay?”

She’s in a hospital room, that much is obvious. There’s a big window next to her bed, and a vase full of cosmos on the little table across the room. Her body feels tired, but not painful. Akino and Bisuke are curled up at the foot of her bed. Her hair feels gross, but it is at least in a surprisingly neat braid. *I wonder who…? Maybe one of the nurses?*

Abruptly, the events of the last day hit Sakura like a train, a battering ram of fear and despair and pain that bulldozes straight through her prefrontal cortex and spears out the back of her skull. “I don’t…know how I’m not dead,” she amends numbly.

Then the rest of her brain finally turns on, a neglected motor sputtering to life after half a dozen fruitless pulls on the ripcord. “The boys!” she cries, scrambling upright. “And Kimura-san! And her baby! And Pakkun! And Uncle-Musashi! And—and *you!”*

Kakashi-sensei helps her up, giving her an arm to brace on and tucking a pillow behind her lower back once she’s moderately less supine.

“Naruto and Sasuke are fine, having fully recovered from their respective bouts of exhaustion. Kimura-san and her baby are also alive and well, though I think they’re monitoring her for pre-eclampsia after such a thrilling little escapade.”

He takes a moment to make sure her change in altitude isn’t going to knock her unconscious before continuing. “Pakkun was a little roughed up but the very nice Inuzuka vet said he will make a full recovery, and gave him a rawhide chew for being a good patient, so he’s fine. Your uncle was collected from the border with Iron by a Konoha patrol and will remain in protective custody until Abe Kennichi is arrested by the appropriate authorities.”

Sakura’s mouth thins into a line despite all of that good news. “He ran?”

“Vamoosed,” Kakashi-sensei confirms with a nod. “But there are a lot of very smart people looking for him, so he won’t stay in the wind for long.”

She nods. “And you…?”

He shrugs. “Eh, other than a chronic case of being cursed with students who are way too fast to sacrifice themselves, I’m peachy.”

Here it comes. Forget a lecture, Sakura is pretty sure Kakashi-sensei might full-on wallop her ass for this one. It’s like she took every precaution and rule he ever prescribed her and hurled them into the wind. She hunches her shoulders and prepares for the explosion.

…but nothing comes.

She peeks at him to find the man watching her, arms crossed. Her teacher's expression—what she can see of it—appears calm, but there's a vein on his bicep throbbing with what she's pretty sure is irritation. He's only wearing his sleeveless mask-shirt with hospital scrub pants, which has the effect of making him look all the more powerful and intimidating.

Then Kakashi-sensei sighs. "I'm not gonna chew you out," he says.

Sakura squints at him, suspicious. "You're not?"

"No, I'm not," he confirms. "I'll say my piece later. I am, however, going to unleash your teammates upon you."

Then he turns slightly to call over his shoulder, voice loud to presumably penetrate the closed door. *"Boys?* Come on in."

Sakura swallows as anxiety prickles on the back of her neck. Sure, this isn't one of the dozen near-death experiences she just had, but it's still scary. Sasuke and Naruto…they've never been angry with her before, not *really.*

The door all but slams open and Sakura's two young teammates come thundering in, practically climbing over one another in their rush.

They make it to the side of her hospital bed, and Kakashi-sensei is kind enough to scoot his chair back to give them more room. Or he's getting out of the blast radius, hard to say.

No words are said for several long seconds, but the longer the boys stare at her, eyes wide, the more agitated they seem to become. In fact, Naruto is rapidly assuming the demeanor of a teakettle about to boil over, as his cheeks redden and his mouth screws up into a ferocious frown.

Sasuke's glare is a little less theatrical but no less intense, and in any other circumstance she might be glad for such focused attention from him. As it is, Sakura would rather be anywhere but here right now, and she shrinks under the combined scrutiny of her two teammates.

After a few more seconds, Sakura decides to pull the bandaid off, and says quietly, "You guys can yell at me. It's okay."

Naruto puffs up at that, looking like he's about to take her up on the offer when he just…deflates.

"I don't wanna yell," he mutters, eyes now trained on his shoes. "I just…I just wanna know why you thought it was *okay."*

Sakura tries not to wince at the way his voice breaks with emotion, and must quickly throttle her own tears that threaten to boil up. They don't want your blubbering, they want an explanation, she reminds herself.

And Sakura is pretty good at explaining.

She takes a moment to collect her thoughts, averting her gaze to her lap so she can think more clearly. Her leg…her leg hasn't hurt at all, now that she's thinking about it. In a brief, silent bout of panic, Sakura wiggles the toes on her left foot as is deeply relieved that the blanket moves appropriately. She didn't lose her leg then, that's good.

The brief terror fades and she refocuses back on the task at hand: *Make your teammates not hate you.*

"It's not that I thought it was *okay,"* Sakura begins, fisting her free hand in the ratty covers. "It was just…necessary. I knew if someone didn't stay behind, they'd catch us, and it made the most sense for me to do that."

She hazards a glance up as she finishes that thought and is surprised to see Sasuke jump in with a response, though his is entirely signed.

“But you didn’t know that,” he signs in rapid, fierce movements. *“Not for certain. You just decided it without consulting anybody.”*

Sakura opens her mouth to counter that but Sasuke isn’t finished, and she can only watch as he continues to gesture, pinned by his furious glare.

“You never talked to us or asked us what we thought. And why exactly did it make the most sense for you to stay behind? Do you think you’re that much stronger than us?” He demands silently.

“No!” Sakura denies, already beginning to fall back into the habit of signing while she speaks. “Sasuke, I don’t think that at all.”

He frowns, obviously unconvinced, and makes the familiar sweeping gesture for *explain.*

“It’s *my* fault we continued with the mission,” Sakura says. “I insisted on it. I was…taking responsibility.”

Sasuke’s expression is acidic with disdain, his lip curling as he signs, *“That’s not all of it. You know it.”*

“Sasuke…” There’s a tinge of warning in her voice now, as his attitude continues to whittle down the thin threads of her patience. Yes, they deserve an explanation, but she also saved their butts! A little gratitude wouldn’t be misplaced!

“If that’s true,” Sasuke grits out, speaking for the first time as he continues to sign. “If that’s true, you’re more stupid than I ever imagined.”

Sakura flinches as if struck, and those last prickles of anxiety become the kindling of righteous anger, her remorse subsumed in its

entirety by indignation. The next words swell in her chest, filling up every crack and crevice, pushing *up up up* against her ribs until she's sure to burst.

"It's because I'm nobody, and I understand that!"

The shout almost echoes in the small room, leaving an utter void of sound in its wake. Even the machines seem to fall silent.

Then, the words begin to tumble out in earnest.

"Time and time and time again it's been pounded into my head that I'm a clanless, no-name, civilian *brat,"* Sakura snarls, fueled by the looks of surprise on her teammate's faces. Humiliatingly, she also begins to cry.

The genin thinks back to being frozen to a metal chair, the naked backs of her thighs bitten by the cold as a man thrice her age dug through her mind like it was a bargain bin at the supermarket. Punishment for her sin of trying to be better than she was before, sanctioned by the mere fact that nobody who might care would be powerful enough to stop it.

And there's no doubt in her mind that those mysterious means of communication—the ones that Pakkun had mentioned in the cave—would have been used to save any of her other three teammates, no questions asked. Sakura is the only one who didn't qualify.

"Kakashi the copycat nin of the Hatake clan, Sasuke the Uchiha with your kekkei-genkai," Sakura counts, pointing to each shinobi as she names them. "Even Naruto of the freaking Uzumaki clan, who has some weird special connection to the hokage—not to mention his insane chakra! And then there's me…Sakura."

"Sakura," she repeats, her name ugly and clumsy in her own mouth. "What did my records say? Clever and obedient but otherwise unremarkable, right?"

The memory of her teacher's words turns her stomach, and Sakura's chest feels unbearably tight. The heart rate monitor is going ballistic and the shrill *beepbeepbeepbeepbeep* makes her want to do something insane like chew her own arm off, so in a (probably somewhat overdramatic) move, she rips the connecting pads off in a flourish.

Kakashi-sensei begins to stand at that; raising his hands placatingly. "Sakura—"

But she's not done.

"It's so, *so* painfully obvious where I fall," Sakura cuts him off.

But the matter of the truth only sets in her own bones as the next words leave her mouth: "I wasn't put on Team Seven because they thought I could stand beside you all as an equal," she says slowly, almost numbly as realization sets in.

"They put me on this team because they thought I *wouldn't get in the way."*

A heavy silence follows, broken only by the quiet beeping of machinery and her sniffles. Sakura looks to her sensei and finds his gaze, holding it.

"Am I wrong, Kakashi-sensei?"

He's quiet for a moment before he says, "That's not *exactly—"*

"See?!" Sakura demands with a hysterical, heartbroken laugh. "Sensei, you were fine with ignoring me until I started asking for your attention. You were going to let me fade away into the background until I became a paper ninja or gave up."

Her teacher flinches at the accusation, and a brief bolt of regret goes through Sakura. But it is indeed brief, and she's not about to lose steam now.

Sweeping her free arm at the window that overlooks the village, Sakura continues, “Konoha is happy to send me out to risk my life, but the second I *choose* to do it, *I'm* the asshole?”

Naruto, who’s been standing silent this whole time, suddenly snaps, “But we’re not the village! We’re your team!”

Sakura could *scream.* “That doesn’t—”

“It does matter!” He cries. “It has to! It’s like sensei said, shinobi who abandon the rules are trash, but those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash!”

Part of Sakura agrees with him; a logical fraction that understands they don’t exist within a vacuum and that her decisions as an individual probably impact her team and family primarily, followed by the village at large.

The rest of Sakura wants to strangle him. You don’t get to ignore the rules if you’re not special enough, that’s just how the world freaking works. Sakura learned that long ago, around the same time she learned that crying only makes the bullies pull on your hair harder.

How can Naruto have this naive, thoughtless belief system and still want to be hokage, the shinobi in the village who practically by default has the greatest amount of blood on his hands? *Does he want to be the old man dragging little girls in their underwear into his office to interrogate them?*

“Being a shinobi isn’t all daisies and romantic quotes,” Sakura retorts, her temper getting the better of her sense, as it almost always does. “We don’t always save the day. Sometimes *we’re* the bad guy, Naruto.”

Naruto’s face hardens. “You think I don't know that?”

Distantly, Sakura recognizes this argument has spiraled, and that if the roles were swapped she would be the one yelling at him and

righteously so, and that she should really shut her trap.

Presently, Sakura does what she's wont to do, and continues to pick a fight.

"You sure do act like you don't," she snipes.

This time it's Sasuke who interrupts. "So we're expected to just deal with the fact that you're going to throw yourself on every sword?" He demands. "How can our team have any trust like that?"

Trust? The word throws Sakura for a loop and she freezes, stunned.

He forges on, heedless to her astonishment.

"We're either going to act as a team—a fucking real one—or we should just drop this bullshit altogether," he says with finality, making Sakura's heart sink. "You don't get to decide everything just because you *think* you know best."

It might be the greatest number of words he's said in sequence to her, ever. Sakura only has a moment to ponder such a momentous occasion when he whirls and stomps out, slamming the door behind him. She watches him go, mouth agape in shock.

That's…that's freaking rich, coming from you, mister lone wolf who doesn't need friends! Sakura wants to shout, but the words get stuck in her throat. Instead, all she manages is a weak, muttered *"Whatever."*

Naruto is quiet for another moment. "I…I really like being on a team with you, Sakura-chan," he says eventually. "I don't want it to end. But I can't do it if you're gonna keep thinking that way."

Despite herself, Sakura asks, "What way?"

"Like you matter less than us," he says. "I don't care what the village thinks. And it's not like they—" But Naruto cuts himself off, lips thinning.

The uncharacteristic hesitation—or really, restraint—from the boy is what finally snaps Sakura out of her reactive, furious stupor. But he turns and leaves before she can say another word.

Sakura looks at the remaining teammate in the room, feeling mulish and hurt. “So, is this where you kick me off the team?” She asks, certain that must be her fate.

But sensei merely releases a gusty sigh. “No,” he says, and drops back down into his chair. “But it is where I ask if you truly want to be on it.”

Sakura’s hackles rise. “Of course I do!”

Everything she’s done has been for this stupid team!

Kakashi-sensei’s eyes narrow. “And are you willing to change your behavior?”

Sakura hesitates, though not so much out of resistance as it is from sheer uncertainty. It feels like…like asking a mortal to walk shoulder to shoulder with gods and act like they belong there.

He sighs again, clearly irritated now. “See, that’s the thing,” Kakashi-sensei says. “Saying that you want to be a real part of this team and acting like it are two different things. An apology without actionable changes is just an excuse, Sakura. We’ve talked about this before.”

She flinches, cowed. “I know, but—”

He continues, unrelenting. “You’re willing to die for your teammates, but not listen to them when they express valid concerns. That’s not trust, that’s not teamwork, that’s blasé disregard for your own safety and a dangerous penchant for martyrdom.”

Sakura hunches even further.

“How would you feel if it were the other way around, and they decided your life was worth throwing away because of your

heritage?” he asks.

Sakura blinks, and really thinks about it. A few long seconds pass. “Sad.”

Then she amends, “Devastated. And angry.”

He softens a bit. “You see? Those boys are angry because someone betrayed their trust and endangered a person they care about—*you,”* Kakashi-sensei says, pointing at her. “It’s just a little tricky because you’re also the offending party.” The twinkle in his eyes is wry.

At Sakura’s disbelieving, wide-eyed stare, he sighs again, though it’s more sympathetic than it is exasperated.

“Sasuke is the one who braided your hair,” he says, apropos of nothing, a sentence that turns Sakura’s world completely upside down. “And see those flowers? Naruto went to the Yamanaka shop so he could ask which ones were your favorites.”

Then, Kakashi-sensei reaches out to ruffle her hair. “There is no doubt in my mind that you care deeply about those two boys, but somehow it seems to have escaped your usually very keen eye that they care a lot about you in return.”

And at that, Sakura shatters, and begins to bawl.

“I’m suh-suh-*sorry,”* she cries, a wail that sounds pathetic even to her own ears. “I’m so sorry!”

The genin sniffles messily, one hand swiping at her face while the other yanks ineffectually at its sling prison. She must look so freaking pathetic right now, *god.*

“I want to be on Team Seven,” Sakura sobs. “I really, really do.”

Kakashi-sensei gives her a moment to compose herself a bit, his hand a comforting weight on the top of her head. She leans into it,

desperate for a kind touch. After a minute or two of intentionally slowing her breathing, she feels ready to keep talking.

“I-I don’t…I don’t think I realized how much it was still bothering me,” she admits. “The…distance, I guess, between me and them. It’s what started everything, why I began working harder. Why I kept at dangerous training even when you asked me not to.”

Sensei’s hand shifts from her head to resting comfortingly on her back.

“I don’t want to be the expendable one,” she says in a tiny, tiny voice. “But I think…a part of me was convinced I always would be, and then I just kept hearing it over and over and *over* . It kinda felt like I was at least taking back control, if I was the one to…to expend myself.”

Sakura chuckles at her own awkward wording. God, she’s suddenly so *tired.*

Kakashi-sensei merely nods in response, his eyes nothing but kind understanding. The genin stares at her hand fisted in the thin hospital blanket for a moment. “Can I still be on Team Seven?”

“You can,” he says, and the air-stealing knot in Sakura's chest loosens. Not all of the way, but she can breathe again. “You are.”

Twisting, Sakura bows as much as she can manage in her bed and says, “Thank you, sensei, and I’m sorry.”

His palms are on her shoulders immediately, gently pressing her back up. “No need for that,” he says, but Sakura isn’t so sure.

She watches him for a moment. “Are you…also angry?” she asks, wondering if that’s presumptuous.

“I was furious,” Kakashi-sensei admits plainly, startling Sakura. She ducks her head, shame burning in her gut all over again.

“However, I already had a pretty good idea of why you did it, and I definitely know fully now,” he says. “In no way am I endorsing your decisions, but I understand why you made them, and I’ve found that one of the best treatments for anger is understanding.”

Sakura considers that, but a restlessness remains in her heart. “...Am I trash for what I did?” she asks eventually.

“No,” her teacher answers immediately. “If you had abandoned your teammates to save your own skin, or left Kimura-san to be taken, *that* would have made you trash. Your intent was to save your team and save Kimura-san, even if your execution was a little misguided.”

Sakura digests that, but before she can respond, Kakashi-sensei continues, “Sakura, Pakkun told me about the way you took command after I went down. Calling for team formations, making decisions based on pragmatism rather than panic. You picked up the slack when I fell short, and pretty handily at that. More than anything, I’m incredibly proud of you.”

Naturally, that sets off another round of bawling, though shorter this time. Kakashi-sensei waits patiently for her to calm down.

As the tears taper off, a hesitant smile even curls her lips. “Well…if there’s any lingering anger, you could always make me run more laps to atone,” Sakura suggests timidly, even though the mere concept of her participation in team training feels fragile, tenuous.

“I did think about asking Gai to dig up some of his more ruthless training regimens,” sensei admits. “But then I got your absurdly long medical report and Pakkun’s account of what happened in that cave. I’d hazard a guess that it was probably more than enough punishment to dissuade a repeat offense.”

Sakura laughs hollowly, as the choked gasps of the first man rings in her ears, followed by the whispered pleas of the second. She has to physically shake her head to get the afterimages of their bodies to leave her mind’s eye.

He watches her for a moment. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Sakura considers that briefly before shaking her head. “Not right now,” she says. “Is that okay?”

“No problem at all,” Kakashi-sensei accepts. “But protocol does dictate that you have to speak with someone—be it me or a counselor—after your first kill in the field. Ideally within a month or so.”

Sakura nods slowly. “I can manage that.”

She doesn’t think she’ll go to a counselor; the idea of sitting down with a stranger, however kind and experienced they are, and rehashing some of the worst moments of her life…it just sounds more anxiety-inducing than helpful. She’s not sure if subjecting herself to Kakashi-sensei’s judgment will be any better, but his disappointment is at least a familiar sting.

They sit in relatively companionable silence for a moment before Kakashi-sensei shifts, rubbing the back of his neck a little hesitantly. “One thing we do need to discuss soon is the matter of the summoning contract.”

Sakura startles, somehow having forgotten about the very thing that saved her life. It occurs to her then that this is a man whose family has a mangetsu rank contract with wolves, and the canines on the scroll she signed were hand-picked and raised by him…presumably based on some evaluation of their potential and overall harmony with the pack.

Sakura, like some kind of parasitic interloper, had gone ahead and forced her way onto it. A space-time hopping barnacle. Worse…an *uninvited guest.* Not to mention that Pakkun had basically confirmed that signing a summoning contract on a human was illegal. Kakashi-sensei is committing a crime because of her!

Face flushing in humiliation, Sakura tries to bow again but her stupid sling gets in the way. “I’m so sorry I appropriated your contract to bail myself out of a situation of my own creation,” she hastily apologizes. “Whatever I need to do to make it right, please tell me.”

But sensei is already waving his hands, clearly uncomfortable at her hangdog display. “No, no, that’s not what I meant at all—I just wanted to ask you how you felt about it.”

Sakura unbends to squint at her teacher. “Um…well, how do *you* feel about it?” she counters in lieu of answering.

Kakashi-sensei’s expression is sheepish. “Honestly? I’m fine with it. More than fine, really.”

Sakura gapes. “Really?!”

“Really,” he confirms. “It’s a little unorthodox, and taboo I suppose—”

“You mean illegal.”

“Meh. You have *no* idea how much being able to summon the ninken back to me helped reduce my anxiety when they were puppies,” he says with a sigh, slumping down in the rickety chair. “I can always bring you back to me if we get separated. Maybe I’ll stop going gray. Really, I should have thought of this sooner!”

Sakura giggles, unable to help the warm and gentle thing taking up residence beneath her breastbone. Kakashi-sensei is just too adorable sometimes. “You were gray when I met you, sensei.”

He ruffles her hair for that, and she squeals and swats at his hand as if she doesn’t love it.

“In all seriousness, if you want to break the contract we can do that,” he says, back to business. “But know that I have no problem keeping it as long as you’re comfortable with it. One thing you’ll need to consider is something called transference—”

“Oh, Pakkun-sensei explained that to me already,” Sakura tries to wave her hand dismissively, but *ugh* it’s still in stupid sling jail. “I’m alright with that. Maybe you’ll get some of my super good chakra control!”

“Maybe,” he agrees, audibly amused. “We’ll have to keep an eye on it, I’m not exactly sure what happens when there are humans signed on as both summoner and summons in addition to animals. You could end up adopting some traits from both me and them.”

Sakura shrugs. “That’s fine—wait. Will *I* go gray?!” she demands, suddenly a little less keen on the idea.

His expression becomes put-out. “I’ll have you know my peers say it looks distinguished and the ladies call me a silver fox.”

Sakura tries not to cringe visibly and probably fails, before something distracts her. “Speaking of hair, why is part of your head shaved?” she asks, pointing at his bird’s nest of silver. The area around his temple and down behind his hair is shorn off.

He glances up as if he could see his own hairline and she snickers. “Ah, well apparently using medical ninjutsu on a patient suffering from chakra-activated poisoning is unwise, so they had to give me pedestrian stitches until that was safely out of my system.”

Sakura tilts her head consideringly. “I kinda like it,” she admits. “If you shave the other side but still keep it long on top and in the back, you’d look super cool!”

He raises an amused brow. “Would I now?”

“You would,” Sakura confirms with a nod. “I *am* the most fashionable member of Team Seven, after all.”

“This is true,” he acknowledges,

Sakura watches him for a moment before something completely unrelated occurs to her. Short attention span, thy name is Sakura.

“Sensei, remember that weird blue necklace that Zabuza gave me?”

He blinks at her. “The one that had to be peeled out of your grip by the hospital staff? Remarkably strong for someone unconscious, by the way. But yes, I’m familiar with it.”

Sakura snorts, amused by the description. “I…I think it saved my life,” she says hesitantly. “I didn’t have enough chakra to sign the scroll, but then I squeezed the pendant and it cut my hand and then it went *fwoosh!* And flooded me with chakra.”

She looks at her bandaged right hand, wondering if the scars from the cuts remain after being healed. For some reason, she kind of hopes they do.

“It smelled like so many different things, I wonder…could it be chakra from a bunch of different people…?” Sakura muses aloud. Then she looks at him. “Sensei, what *was* that thing? Is it gone?”

He sighs, scratching the back of his neck. “It was a pain in the ass to nick from the medic-nins’ lounge, is what it was,” he grumbles, before fishing something out of his pocket.

The necklace!

He holds out the necklace for her to see and then pockets it again before Sakura can even think of reaching out for it. She pouts. Okay, fine, maybe the weird, mysterious chakra-embueing pendant isn’t something she should mess with right now. But technically, Zabuza gave it to *her!* Not sensei!

“I’ll return it to you once you’re back to one hundred percent,” he says, correctly interpreting her mulish expression. “It feeds off of the chakra of whoever is wearing it, so it could slow down your energy recuperation.”

Sakura goggles at the explanation. *“What?”* she cries. “Feeds off of —what?!”

“Chakra,” he repeats. “It’s alive. Sort of.”

When he doesn’t elaborate, the genin glares at him. “You gotta give me more than that, sensei.”

“This is a scale of a living sword-creature called Samehada,” Kakashi-sensei says after a beat, which is so many strange words in a row that Sakura can only stare blankly. “And Samehada absorbs chakra from whoever is wielding it, as nourishment.”

Sakura shudders, then. “Like a parasite,” she surmises.

Kakashi-sensei shrugs. “Well, it returns the favor by cooperating during battle and infusing them with chakra if they need it. ”

“Ohhh!” Sakura’s eyes are wide as it clicks. “Food for protection! Like ants and aphids.”

“...Sure. Anyway, it must have sensed you were low on chakra, and gave you a chakra infusion.”

Sakura nods slowly, before a cheeky grin curls her mouth. “So that means…it likes me?”

“In the same way that a mosquito likes a person, sure.”

Sakura deflates a little. *Aw, dang.*

Then he sighs and scratches the back of his neck. “That being said, I’ve heard the blade is notoriously picky, and obviously it had enough chakra to sustain itself without you for a while…so, yes. It likes you.”

Sakura cheers. “Whoo!”

Sasuke might not like her back yet, but at least the weird parasitic shark-sword scale thing does! That counts for something…right?

“Does it like you too, sensei?” she asks. It must, right?

“I get the distinct impression it does not,” he answers, a little cryptically. “But maybe it understands that it'll return to you soon enough because it only grew spikes to stab me once.”

“Uh….huh,” Sakura nods slowly, mildly horrified. “You said it absorbs chakra though, right? Is that bad for someone like me, since I have small reserves?”

Kakashi-sensei’s head tips to one side in consideration, and he seems to ponder the question for a moment. “Not necessarily,” he returns eventually. “Draining your chakra is how you grow your reserves, so it might actually help you improve in the long run. And unless you empty the tank—like what happened in the cave—it’s just going to need to skim a little off the top to stay full.”

Sakura nods, digesting that. Having an emergency stash of chakra at her fingertips is probably worth giving up a little bit of her own, anyway. It certainly saved her bacon back in Tetsugawa.

Kakashi-sensei ruffles her hair before standing from the hospital chair with an old-man grunt. “Alright, I’m going to let you rest. I’ll be back tomorrow morning to sign the discharge papers. Akino and Bisuke will stay with you tonight.” The two mentioned dogs whuff quietly from their spot on the end of her bed.

Sakura nods. “Okay,” she says in a small voice, suddenly desperate for him to stay but completely aware how ridiculous that is.

Kakashi-sensei pauses for a moment after standing, looming over her bed with an inscrutable expression on his face. Then, shocking her completely, he bends like a willow bowing under the weight of its own heavy branches, his forehead dropping onto the crown of her head with a quiet *thump.*

“...I’m very glad you’re okay, Sakura,” he murmurs eventually, sounding exhausted. “Welcome home.”

Feeling small and far more cared about than she deserves, Sakura whispers, *“I’m back.”*

Then he straightens and heads for the door without another word.

As Kakashi-sensei’s hand closes around the doorknob, Sakura swallows, and is unable to stop the desperate rush of words that tumble from her mouth. “Are you *really* okay with me still being on Team Seven?”

He looks at her over his shoulder and seems to ponder it for a moment. “Let me put it this way, Sakura-chan. Until you—or those boys—are strong enough to get rid of me, I'm never letting you out of my sight again.”

And then he’s gone.

Sakura stares, speechless, as the door closes with a soft *click* behind him.

Kakashi-sensei hadn’t been exaggerating when he referred to her medical report as absurdly long.

It’s…a doozy.

After her teacher left, Sakura had fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep (no doubt aided by some powerful drugs). She slept through the afternoon and most of the night, waking only when a nurse appeared to gently chastise her for taking off her heart rate monitor, and then again with the afternoon sun streaming through her window.

Well, the afternoon sun and the arrival of a boisterous, red-haired doctor, who is accompanied by a much less boisterous, bespectacled man.

“Good morning, Haruno-kun!” The doctor greets her, all but throwing herself onto the rolly stool in the room. It glides across the floor and

comes to a halt by her bedside. “My name is Doctor Mariko, I’ve been the attending on your case. Looks like you’re getting discharged today!”

Sakura smiles at the woman tentatively. “Um, I think so!”

The woman grins at her and nods. “Excellent, excellent. Glad to see you lookin’ so perky, you really had us worried for a second there! By the way, this is Kabuto-kun, he’s studying under me as a medical intern. Is it alright if he observes this last check-up and discharge process?”

Sakura glances at the older boy, who offers her a calm smile in return. He seems…nice enough, she guesses. Certainly inoffensive. He has all of the menace of a pile of wet paper. And who is she to stand in the way of someone’s education?

“That’s fine,” Sakura agrees.

“Great, thank you!” Doctor Mariko pulls out a clipboard from where it’s tucked under her arm and begins to flip through the papers on it. “Has anyone explained your case to you?”

The genin shakes her head. “I’ve been asleep, mostly.”

Doctor Mariko nods. “That's understandable, given the extent of your injuries. Our top-notch medical nin were able to treat them, of course, but your body still had to do a lot of work!”

Sakura digests that and is unable to help her curiosity when she asks, “So medical chakra stimulates the healing process but doesn’t actually convert to collagen or red blood cells or anything? All of the building blocks have to be endogenous, you can just…stack them faster?”

Doctor Mariko’s expression is surprised and delighted. “Precisely so, Haruno-kun!”

Sakura hums, immediately lost in thought as she forgets the whole point of why a (probably busy) doctor is sitting in front of her. “Malnourished patients would be a bit tricky then,” she hazards. “Especially since surgery usually precludes eating ahead of time. Can you safely catalyze the breaking down of existing fat and muscle to repurpose for healing?”

The doctor literally claps with glee, apparently quite pleased with Sakura’s rambling. “Correct again!” Then she turns to the intern. “Now let’s put you on the stand, Kabuto-kun. Care to explain?”

He nods with that same calm smile. It’s honestly a little creepy…his affect is just nonexistent. “In severe trauma cases where the patient’s body will be unable to provide all of the necessary resources for even just life-saving care, a special feeding tube is installed to provide nutrients, and an additional medical-shinobi will stimulate the adsorption of these molecules to make them bioavailable almost immediately.”

“Whoa,” Sakura gapes, deeply impressed. Medical shinobi really have thought of everything, it seems!

“Technically it *is* possible to catalyze catabolism to free up endogenous resources, as you theorized,” Doctor Mariko says with a nod. “But that’s dangerous without extremely fine chakra control, because you need to control exactly what you’re breaking down. A mistake could mean turning someone’s heart or liver tissue into a new kidney or blood, which would be a net-zero improvement at best, and organ failure at worst.”

Sakura nods, secretly wondering if her control is good enough. *Maybe…*

“To my knowledge, there is only one medical shinobi capable of such a feat,” the doctor continues. “Konoha’s own Senju Tsunade-hime.”

“Does Tsunade-hime take students?” Sakura asks impulsively, which earns a belly-laugh from Doctor Mariko and a small smirk from

Kabuto-san.

Sakura's face reddens, a little embarrassed at her foolish presumptiveness. But also…you never get anything if you don't at least ask. And after that ordeal in the cave, having some medical ninjutsu in her toolkit along with the first-aid she learned from Kondo-san seems like a good idea.

"Unfortunately, Tsunade-hime is…on an extended sabbatical," Doctor Mariko says wryly. "However, we do offer a beginners course in medical ninjutsu here at the hospital. You would need to pass a written test, and get your team leader's approval, but it's offered to all genin-level and above shinobi in the village. Would you be interested in that?"

Sakura beams at that. "Yes, very interested!"

The doctor smiles and scribbles something down on the clipboard. "Great, I'll have Kabuto-kun go grab an application for you right now so I can include it in your discharge paperwork. Now, let's get into the nitty-gritty, shall we?"

And boy, do they.

Sakura's intake information is…a little horrifying to say the least.

Patient was admitted to Konoha General ICU with polytrauma as following:

Complete comminuted femoral shaft fracture of the left leg

Compartment syndrome of left thigh

Right rib hairline fractures (8-10)

Bilateral abrasions on kneecaps

Lacerations to the right palm

Third-degree palmar scalds on right hand

Edema and erythema of distal right arm

The doctor whistles after she finishes reading off the list. “Yowch,” she says commiseratingly, and accepts a stack of papers from the newly-returned Kabuto. “Now, we’ve effectively *‘healed’* all of this—as in you are no longer acutely injured—but there are a few caveats.”

Sakura nods, swallowing. She hadn’t even known her ribs were broken.

“We performed an emergency fasciotomy on your leg to relieve the compartmental pressure, followed by a full surgical repair of the fracture. However, due to the extent of the injury and the length of time it went untreated, you do have some tissue scarring in the surrounding muscles,” Doctor Mariko explains, and Sakura nods again.

“Your improvised traction splint—very clever, by the way—was absolutely critical to minimizing that damage, so well done with that,” she compliments, and Sakura flushes.

“That wasn’t my idea,” she demurs. “It was my teammate who was with me.”

“Well, tell them to apply to the medical program with you,” the doctor suggests with a grin. “We can use that kind of innovation.”

Sakura doesn’t think Pakkun would be interested, but she also doesn’t feel like explaining a talking pug to the doctor right now, so she just nods silently.

“Right now you’ve got some muscle relaxers in your system, but that kind of deep tissue scarring is going to need fairly consistent physical therapy to keep the muscles from getting locked up,” the red-headed woman explains, making Sakura’s heart sink.

“For how long?” She asks, dreading the answer.

The doctor’s returning smile is damningly sympathetic. “Forever, I’m afraid. It will probably improve over time, especially since you’re still growing. Thankfully, the PT is pretty simple, just some daily stretches and a few exercises. I’ll send you home with a packet of instructions and we’ll get you scheduled with a follow-up appointment with one of our physical therapists, too.”

That’s not too bad, Sakura reasons, trying to keep a lid on her reactive tears. She’s still alive, she still even *has* the dang leg, which had been questionable for a moment there in the cave! *Having to do some stretches isn’t the end of the world.*

“The rib fractures and abrasions were an easier fix,” Doctor Mariko continues, flipping through a few pages on the clipboard. “But the matter of your arm…that one was a little tricky. You presented with fairly extreme swelling and redness of the entire lower arm, but the only visibly burned area was your palm. It appeared almost as if it had been burned from the inside.”

Sakura’s mouth tightens, unsure what to say. Kakashi-sensei had said to keep this kind of chakra manipulation stuff under wraps, but this lady is a doctor…so does that still apply?

Her gaze flickers over impulsively to Kabuto, but he’s still standing there with that placid, serene expression on his face. If he’s curious about the topic, he doesn’t show it.

“We proceeded with treating it as a burn and it healed up rather nicely, though you’ll notice it’s still heavily bandaged,” Doctor Mariko points to the offending limb with her pen. “That’s due to lymphedema. Lymph is part of your immune system and a byproduct of the healing process. As you can imagine, there can be a bit of an excess when healing is expedited by medical chakra. The compression wraps on your arm were to reduce extreme swelling as we healed it.”

Sakura nods, wiggling her fingers experimentally. They're individually wrapped all of the way to the tip, but move adroitly enough despite their trappings. A relief, given how the hand had been rapidly losing dexterity and sensation back in the cave.

"I'll have you keep those wraps on for another twenty-four hours, and then feel free to remove them. If you start to get any tingling or numbness in that arm, come back here immediately, okay?"

"Okay."

The doctor flips through all the pages on her clipboard one last time, scribbles a few things here and there. Without looking up from her writing, she says in a loud voice, "Did you get all of that, Hatake-san? It's rude to eavesdrop, you know."

Sakura startles at that, and then is further startled when the door to her room swings open to reveal Kakashi-sensei. He's back in his regular clothes—the ones her mom made for him—and gives her a little salute.

"Yo," he greets, before sauntering over to the hospital bed to ruffle her hair. "You're not giving the good doctor a hard time now are you?"

Sakura pouts. "No," says, and snaps her teeth half-heartedly at his hand as it pulls away.

"Eesh," he mutters, stuffing the hand back into his pocket as if to protect it.

Doctor Mariko snorts. "That's a little rich coming from you, Hatake-san. I once walked into an examination room only to witness you diving out of the window to avoid a check-up."

"Lies and slander," he refutes calmly, before his attention turns to Kabuto. "And you are?"

Sakura blinks at the change in her teacher's voice, suddenly flat and a little curt. It makes his prior affect—bored amusement—seem sparklingly affectionate.

“Yakushi Kabuto,” the young man says with a moderately deep bow. “And you of course need no introduction, Hatake-san.”

“Of course,” Kakashi-sensei agrees dully. Then he looks at Doctor Mariko and asks, “Can I have my student back now?”

Doctor Mariko blinks, also surprised by the sudden hostility. “Oh, of course,” she agrees. “I just need you to sign—”

He whips out his inkan before she can even finish. After three pages get stamped, Sakura is a free agent once more.

“We still need to get her scheduled with a physical—”

“I took care of that,” Kakashi-sensei cuts her off. “Where are Sakura’s things?”

The doctor wordlessly points to a pair of green plastic bags labeled PATIENT BELONGINGS on a chair by the door. Hilariously, the traction splint appears to be included, wrapped haphazardly in a garbage bag.

“Great!” Kakashi-sensei says with false cheer. “Now, I’m sure you medical professionals are very busy, lots of patients to see and whatnot. We wouldn’t want to keep you. Toodles!”

The obvious dismissal hangs in the air for a second before the doctor nods, her expression still one of confusion. It remains as such while she gathers some of the paperwork off of her clipboard and hands it to Sakura.

“Remember, if you start to feel any numbness in that arm, come back immediately, alright?” The doctor reiterates, catching Sakura’s eye.

“Alright,” Sakura agrees, and accepts the papers with her free hand.

“Thank you for allowing me to observe,” Kabuto adds with another bow. “It was very educational.”

Sakura tries to offer him a smile but it probably comes out more like a grimace. He’s just so…off-putting. “You bet.”

The doctor and intern then exit the room, leaving Sakura with her teacher.

She turns to him with a squint. “You were being kinda rude, sensei.”

She’s only a little bothered by it because that Kabuto dude gave her the creeps, but it’s just weird behavior coming from someone as perpetually cool-headed as Kakashi-sensei. She’s pretty sure she’s watched Naruto be ten-thousand times more obnoxious, and he didn’t even bat an eye. Why did one medical intern get him so ruffled?

“I don’t like that kid,” he says plainly, before stopping to rephrase. “Well, it’s more like I don’t know him. I’ve never heard that name before. I don’t like unknown quantities, and therefore I do not like him.”

It’s a shockingly honest response, and Sakura merely stares for a moment, floored. “Then doesn’t that mean you don’t like almost everyone in the village..?”

He just shrugs. “What can I say, I’m a tough critic. That aside,” he says. “Here, let’s trade.”

Sakura blinks at the item held out in front of her. It’s a small pink duffel bag, the one she keeps in her closet, and it looks full.

“How did you…?”

“I stopped by your home and asked your mother to pack a change of clothes for you,” he explains.

Her mother. Oh god, her *mother* . Abruptly, Sakura wants nothing more than to be swept up into her mother's arms, to feel that comforting warmth and softness.

Then something occurs to Sakura. "Do they…know what happened?"

"They know you were injured on a mission and needed surgery, but I left out the specifics," he responds, before dropping the duffel bag on the bed reaching out to take the papers from her hand. He tucks them under his arm and then begins to undo the clasps on her sling.

Sakura isn't sure how she feels about that. On the one hand, it would have been nice to not have to explain, because she's still so exhausted…on the other, she can be vague about stuff and they won't worry so much. *Yeah, that's probably better,* she decides internally.

Her arm now freed, Sakura flexes her fingers. They feel okay enough, if not weirdly…new. Like these are muscles and tendons she only just installed yesterday. Strange.

"I'll wait in the hall while you get changed," sensei tells her. "Then I'll take you home."

Sakura almost wants to make a token protest—recent evidence shows that she *is* capable of getting herself home, after all. She got herself all the way back here from the other side of the country. She's got two not-broken legs, two not-burned hands, and she's ready to party!

But the protest never comes, and Sakura just nods. He ruffles her hair again before he heads for the door.

Sakura watches it for a moment after it closes, fully convinced for a few seconds that this is just a near-death fever dream, and she's still in that cave, moments away from dying. But the hospital room stays

stubbornly put, and after a minute, Sakura must concede that yes, she really did do it. She got herself home.

Freakin' shannaro.

The duffel bag reveals Sakura's favorite pair of sweats (pink and way too big for her) and her favorite pajama shirt (white with a cute bunny on the front, also way too big for her) among some undergarments and sandals. It's incredibly thoughtful, but Sakura can *feel* how grimy she is and recoils a little at the thought of dirtying these clothes with whatever the sponge-bath she must have received couldn't remove.

Honestly, just knowing that sensei went and got this for her, and her mom knew exactly what to pack…it's plenty comforting enough for now. *Shower first, then comfy clothes!*

With that in mind, Sakura repacks the duffel and snatches up her bagged-up belongings, opting to leave the improvised traction splint behind. She'd like to leave everything even vaguely reminiscent of that stupid cave behind if possible.

Kakashi-sensei looks mildly surprised when she emerges still wearing the hospital-supplied pajamas, but accepts her offered reasoning easily enough. He does drop his shearling-lined jacket around her shoulders before taking all of the bags in her arms. It's warm and smells like cedarwood and instantly makes her drowsy.

"I can carry something," she protests weakly, but he just hums and then begins herding her, confusingly, back into the hospital room instead of towards the elevator.

At her questioning look he says, "We're taking a shortcut, and the windows in the lobby don't open. Trust me, I would know."

At first, Kakashi-sensei's apparently very powerful hatred of all things medical is amusing, but when he sweeps her into his arms and takes to the roofs, bypassing the prying eyes of onlookers…well, Sakura

makes a mental note. *Lobby windows don't open, use the inpatient room ones instead.*

They land on the small stoop of her house with nary a rustle of the cheery daffodils in the wooden tub or the bushy hydrangeas that threaten to swallow the front door. Kakashi-sensei goes to knock, but she stays him with a quick tug on the hem of his sweatshirt.

"Sensei," she murmurs as he crouches to be more eye-level with her. "Thanks for walking me home. And for being okay with me signing the ninken contract. And for letting me stay on Team Seven." She reaches out to cup his masked cheek, needing another reminder that she truly is here, and he's truly here with her. "You're a really good teacher, you know that?"

Kakashi-sensei's eyes widen, perhaps both at the words and the sudden physical contact. Then, they become terribly gentle, and unless Sakura is imagining it…maybe there's a teeny-weeny little sheen to them, too.

"I got lucky," he murmurs. "I've got really great students."

That induces a lip-wobble and Sakura can't help it, she throws her arms around his neck with a quiet sob. God, she's so tired of crying.

He wraps his own around her, holding tight and creating a warm cage that helps soothe that anxious knot that's been lingering in her chest.

"I'm scared to be alone," Sakura admits into the fabric of his sweatshirt. "Every time I close my eyes, it feels like when I open them…I'll be in that cave again."

Kakashi-sensei's arms tighten around her, and he's silent for a long moment before he responds. "Memories, especially bad ones, can be very persistent companions," he says quietly. "It seems like the more you try to push them away, the more they come back to haunt you."

Sakura nods, because yes, *exactly.*

“I don’t have a magic fix I can offer you, but I *can* tell you what has helped me,” he says, and Sakura nods again, a little frantically this time, against his hoodie. They still haven’t let go of each other.

“Talking to people who I trust,” he begins. “That’s probably the biggest one. Finding a physical outlet—a safe one—for the anxious energy. Getting enough sleep is very important for me, I’ve learned.”

Sakura makes a questioning noise that transitions into a squeak as he stands, still holding onto her. Her sandals dangle several inches above the wooden stoop.

“Can’t tell you how many times I’ve woken up convinced I wanted to kill myself but it turns out I just slept poorly,” he admits, startling her. “Well, that wasn’t the *only* factor, but it does impact my mental health a lot. Relatedly, not being halfway to chakra exhaustion twenty-four seven has been a big change for me.”

Sakura makes the same questioning noise. Secretly, she’s stunned by the onslaught of honesty. *Who knew that all it took to get sensei to open up was a hug?*

“I’ve had multiple colleagues tell me I’m disturbingly cheerful these days,” he says, audible amusement in his voice, before finally releasing Sakura so she can stand on her own. She slides down and lands on her feet with a quiet *thump.*

Sakura offers him a teary smile. “I’m glad it helped,” she says genuinely, before leaning in to headbutt him in the chest gently. “Thanks for telling me all of that, sensei.”

In return, Kakashi-sensei ruffles her hair for the umpteenth time. “You’re welcome. Now, get inside and get some more rest. I’ll send the whole pack to stay with you tonight, if that’s okay.”

Sakura nods eagerly, already looking forward to the soothing warmth of a puppy-pile. Nothing brings sweeter dreams than that.

“Are we doing Team Seven training tomorrow?” she asks hopefully. “Oh, and don’t forget your jacket!” She shucks off the outerwear and holds it out.

“Thanks,” he accepts the garment with an eye-smile. “And yes, but a little later than usual, say around noon?”

Sakura nods, happy she’ll get to spend the morning with her folks *and* see her boys tomorrow…if they’ll even look at her that is.

Well, that’s okay…because Sakura has a plan. An apology plan, which is the best kind. Or the worst kind, but it’s good to be prepared.

Speaking of the plan though, there *is* one snag.

“Um, before you go,” Sakura says, before firing up her most powerful and compelling puppy-eyes. “Can I borrow some money?”

---

finally, a not-cliffhanger! it's a miracle!! and sakura, always collecting more chronic injuries. poor kid.

i hope you all enjoyed. comments fuel my writing and i genuinely adore 99% of what i get, though if i may make one small request: if the only thing you care to write is some variation of "GIVE ME MORE NOW" or "well actually xyz plot point couldn't happen" and literally nothing else, please keep it to yourself. to address the first sentiment, understand i am a grown adult with a demanding job. i do not get paid for this. when a reader's only response to something i worked very hard on is to demand more, it's frustrating and demoralizing. to address the second sentiment...well, first of all, this is a fanfic. it is inherently going to go places that canon did not, and i also specify in the tags it is canon divergent. a tremendous amount

of work goes into the logistics of this story. and frankly, if you want something to happen the way *you* envision it, then write it yourself :)

thank you for allowing me to rant on that for a minute. it's been bugging me lately, though i know it shouldn't...but i am human. i really do appreciate when you guys comment, even if it's just a keyboard smash or a bunch of heart emojis. it makes me smile!

next time: sakura makes the apology of the century and gets an offer she would never refuse!

A royal invitation

Chapter 16: A royal invitation

---

hey everyone! bit of a long time lol. i had some health issues crop up, which was pretty distracting/difficult for a while. i'm doing better now.

thank you as always for all of your kind words. also, it was kind of funny how many of you assumed my teaser at the end of the last chapter was ominous (the offer sakura can't refuse) but given how much i've tormented the poor girl...it kind of makes sense.

and huge, huge thanks to my beta, anxiousgrimalkin, without whom you would all be subjected to infinitely many more incorrectly formatted em-dashes, and who makes posting so much easier because i don't have to worry about spell-check. you're the best dude!!

please enjoy lots of good team 7 goodness :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The shower and accompanying bath that Sakura takes that night are the best things she’s ever experienced in her life.

Period. No exceptions. Not even the time Sasuke said her shuriken aim was “not bad” back in the Academy.

Her parents had welcomed her home with fierce hugs and a warm dinner, making her feel so loved and safe and *home* that the cave began to feel like a bad dream, rather than her reality mere hours ago. Or however long it was (she should probably figure that out).

Or it did, until Sakura pulls off the hospital pajama pants to reveal the surgical scar on her left leg.

She gasps when she sees it, utterly taken aback. It stretches all of the way from the lateral side of her knee to her hip bone, the discolored, puckered skin almost a marquise shape and easily three inches wide at its thickest point. It's enormous and deeply ugly and she hates it so much it makes her cry.

Whatever muscle relaxers they administered must be beginning to wear off too because her thigh is beginning to feel a little weird. Sakura ends up laying the packet of PT stretches out on a stool next to the bathtub so she can try some without having to get out. The packet is very thorough, with detailed explanations and diagrams for each movement, which is uplifting. It makes the whole chronic pain thing feel a little less debilitating.

Once clean, Sakura changes into the clothes her mom had packed for her (studiously avoiding looking at her leg) and heads downstairs to join her family for some much-needed relaxation time. It's gearing up to be one of her favorite types of evenings; her mom works on a sewing project on the living room floor while her dad reads from one of his ancient poetry collection books, often reciting one aloud for them to hear. Sakura gets to curl up under his arm on the couch, reading her own book and snacking on persimmon slices and matcha. It's cozy and perfect and as Sakura begins to doze off, she thinks to herself that it doesn't matter where they are or what they're doing, as long as she's with her family, she's home.

Sakura blinks, snorting into bleary awareness when her center of gravity moves. But the familiar smell of her father's aftershave soothes her, and she realizes muzzily that he must be carrying her to her bedroom like he's done a thousand times before. With a happy hum, she curls into his chest as they head up the stairs. Her left ear is pressed to his kosode, so even though the sound is faint, she can *feel* the steady and slow beat of his heart, sweeter than any lullaby.

Her papa tucks Sakura into bed, pulling the covers all of the way up to cover her ear the way he knows she likes. No sooner than she's sufficiently cocooned in warmth do the furry, familiar weights of the ninken begin to descend upon her duvet. Bull flops lazily at the foot of the bed like he always does, while Bisuke circles a spot at least three times before laying down. She can hear her father chuckle as Pakkun noses his way under the covers, curling up next to her belly.

Sakura dreams.

She's back in the cave, but completely alone this time. The basalt spears stretch high, so high above her head she feels like a bug amongst the rubble. The sand-man and ponytail-man are there, bodies as bloody and mutilated as she left them, but they're not dead anymore.

They're just…talking.

The voice of the sand-man is so wet and raspy that his words are indistinguishable, but he keeps speaking anyway, his voice like the drone of a throng of monks, layers and layers of wordless tones. That clear liquid is still sluicing down the ruined skin of his face, soaking the front of his gi like gruesome tears. Ponytail-man responds occasionally, and somehow Sakura feels like she understands the words but couldn't repeat them if someone were to ask. His leg is still bleeding heavily, the pool of blood growing bigger and bigger and bigger.

Sakura can't move, frozen where she sits against her stupid stone spear. The blood spreads until it reaches sand-man first, seeping into his pants, painting his legs a deep crimson. When he moves, the heavy, wet *slap* of soaked fabric echoes in the chamber, making her skin crawl. Then it reaches Sakura.

Her sandals first, then her ankles. The blood feels hot, almost boiling as it spreads up past her knees, and Sakura feels sick from the heavy smell of iron. When it reaches the vulnerable area of her hips

and thighs, she tries to swipe at it with her hands, to move away, to cry out, *anything* but she's utterly frozen, utterly helpless.

No no no no! She wants to scream, but nothing comes out.

The blood begins to squirm as if alive, creeping up her belly, soaking her haori. The sensation of it writhing, slimy and warm, turns her stomach. *Gods please make it stop please please please!*

It climbs and climbs, slithering up her throat, worming it's way into her mouth and—

Sakura wakes with a gasp, shooting upright.

The cry that had been building in her throat comes out as a broken sob, and Sakura can do nothing but clutch at her duvet as her galloping heart thunders in her chest. The ninken faithfully try to console her, offering gentle headbutts and snouts pressed into her neck and hands.

The cold wetness of their snuffling noses is such a difference from the slithery, hot blood that she sobs now with relief as the vice-grip of the night terror begins to loosen on her mind.

"I'm," she manages between gasps. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

The reassurance is as much for her as it is for them.

The pink, flower-shaped digital clock on Sakura's nightstand only reads just after 3AM, meaning she ought to at least try and catch a bit more sleep. Ugh.

Her sheets are soaked with sweat, and the fabric of her pajamas clings irritatingly to her skin. Sakura quickly changes into a fresh pair and pulls her duvet and pillow off of the bed, creating a ramshackle nest in the middle of her room. The ninken assemble into a true puppy-pile this time, and Sakura tucks her body into the furry nooks, seeking warmth.

“If it makes you feel any better,” comes Bull’s deep, guttural rumble. “Boss is keeping watch on your roof tonight.”

Sakura blinks, surprised. *Kakashi-sensei? Why?*

“He doesn’t have to do that,” she murmurs, for lack of a better response. To be abundantly clear, knowing her teacher is guarding her is more comforting than anything she could imagine, but…she doesn’t want to impose, either.

“It’s more for him than it is for you, pup,” Pakkun grumbles from his spot tucked up against her belly. “He’s gonna be antsy for a little while.”

“Oh.”

He probably feels guilty, she realizes. She never did actually tell him the whole ordeal wasn’t his fault. Really, it’s *her* fault. Though sensei would probably argue with her over that, too.

Unstoppable force meets immovable object, she muses. *We could probably power the whole village with our combined guilt and anxiety.*

The thought makes her smile to herself, and after a few minutes, Sakura falls into an uneasy sleep.

It takes four stops at four different supermarkets to allow Sakura to accumulate the supplies necessary for her apology plan.

Her parents accompany her to the first store, in addition to the ninken, and Mebuki is so impressed by the dogs’ ability to sniff out bargains that she requests their company for all future grocery runs. She even offers to craft them each a special dog bed in return, which is received with much excited yelping and barking. Kizashi springs for dango for everyone (including the ninken) and it is all around a very pleasant morning.

However, Sakura clears the shelves of her needed items at that location and is still short, so she bids her parents farewell and sets off to the next closest supermarket with eight furry companions in tow.

It's only once she's emptied the stock of the second and third store that the dogs begin to give her odd looks.

"Do you really need this many…?" Akino asks, the words a little muffled by the very full paper bag he's got clamped in his teeth.

"Yup," Sakura answers firmly, already making a brisk trot for the next store. "I've almost got enough!"

Indeed, the next supermarket provides enough of what she needs (or so she hopes) and with high spirits and fully-encumbered arms, Sakura heads for her team's favorite bridge.

"Hmm," Sakura hums, surveying her potential canvases. The bridge itself won't do because other people need to walk on it, and her stuff might get in the way. She'd also like it to be a bit of a surprise, so arranging it all a little off the beaten path would be smart.

Ultimately, Sakura opts for a small outcropping of the nearby forest. There's a little clearing in the middle that's just perfect; plenty of space but the surrounding trees offer some decent cover.

She has the ninken dump the contents of all of the bags onto the ground and begins to assemble her masterpiece. It takes several minutes, a little finagling, and a few rounds of feedback from her canine friends to get it perfect.

But it is, indeed, perfect.

What is her masterpiece, you might ask?

'I'm sorry :(' spelled out on the grass, the characters created by an alternating pattern of big, ripe tomatoes and cups of ramen. What

better way to show people you care about them than with their favorite foods?

Sakura finishes just in time, too. It's about five minutes until noon.

She gives the set-up a last once-over before nodding to herself. It will be the cherry on top of her apology sundae. Or something.

Excited, and more than a little nervous, Sakura heads back to the bridge at a jog. *I sure hope they don't run late today–*

But her worries are unfounded, because there are two figures on the bridge, ones that she knows all too well.

"Sasuke, Naruto, good morning," Sakura greets, smoothing down her shirt a little reflexively as she approaches. As her haori is temporarily out of commission, the paint-stained henohenomoheji shirt paired with her spare set of spandex shorts was Sakura's choice this morning. In retrospect, the genin kinda wishes she chose something a little less shabby. At least her hair is tied back in her usual Noguchi-homage half ponytail, which helps strengthen her nerves.

"Oh! Er, good morning, Sakura-chan," Naruto returns, in a burst of initial excitement that quickly dims into awkwardness. Sasuke gives her a brief nod and nothing else.

Sakura swallows, trying not to let the chilly reception tank her mood. It's showtime.

Walking up to face her boys, Sakura bends into a deep bow. "Naruto, Sasuke, I want to apologize to you both," she begins, before straightening.

The looks on their faces are of surprise and a little wariness, which isn't ideal but something Sakura can work with. Beginning to sign her words as well, Sakura continues, "You both brought up very valid

points yesterday, and I dismissed them carelessly in the wake of my own anger and fear."

Now she looks to her black-haired teammate. "Sasuke, you're right that my behavior doesn't allow for trust. If I had to constantly worry about one of you trying to take every blow or make the sacrifice play, it would be incredibly distracting in addition to being upsetting. It's not fair that I expected you to deal with that, especially since I made the decision without talking to anyone first. Going forward, I will do my best to communicate better with the team, and to not take on the responsibility for more danger than I should."

Then she turns to the blond. "Naruto, you made an important distinction yesterday, that our team is not the village. And you're right. I don't exist in a vacuum, and my actions impact the people around me the most. Sweeping my choices under the rug of 'village protocol' *was* an accurate reflection of my intentions but that doesn't mean they weren't hurtful or even dangerous. From now on, I will try my hardest to honor my duty to this village but from *within* the framework of our team's values, instead of the other way around."

Sakura faces them both once more, hands clenched into fists at her sides. "I…I *do* love Konoha. I think we're a good village. But there are things that need to change. And I think our team could change them, some day."

She bends into a deep bow once more. "I am sorry for what I did. Please allow me to remain on Team Seven so we can become strong together, strong enough to lead Konoha into a better future!"

Sakura is met with silence for a few long moments. *Well, that's not promising,* she thinks to herself.

She lingers in her bow before beginning to straighten, peeking up with one eye clenched shut as if expecting a physical blow.

And indeed, what she finds is stunning, though not in a bad way.

Naruto is clearly choking back tears, his cheeks red, while Sasuke stares at her with determination writ large on his face.

“Sakura-chan,” Naruto says, but it comes out more like *Zagura-jan* from the crying. “Apology accepted! Let’s be on Team Seven together forever!”

Sakura takes that as her cue, and on impulse she rushes forward to grab the blond in a hug. They squeeze each other tight for a moment.

Then she steps back so she can grip him by the shoulders. “Naruto,” she says fiercely. “I don’t just believe you’re going to become hokage. I’m gonna help make it happen.”

“H-heck yeah!”

“I agree.”

Sakura startles at the unexpected comment, and turns to face Sasuke. His cheeks are reddened slightly, and his gaze cuts away, but his hands begin to shape familiar signs.

“When nobody is being dumb, we make a good team,” he signs. *“There are things I want to change, too. I bet we could do it.”*

Sakura’s smile is surprised and delighted, and she nods eagerly. On impulse, she holds out her pinky to the two boys. “Let’s swear on it!”

Naruto’s pinky hooks around hers without hesitation, which is expected, but to her complete surprise and delight, Sasuke’s hand joins as well. The tangle of pinkies dips once before they disengage, and Sakura steps back with a newfound feeling of excitement and hope.

Then, she remembers her masterpiece.

“Oh! There’s one more thing,” she says, and beckons the boys to follow her. “I have a surprise for you guys.”

Naruto and Sasuke's expressions are curious and dubious, respectively, but they both trail after her readily enough. The trio makes the short trek into the forested outcropping, and Sakura finds herself almost skipping with glee. Now for the cherry on top!

The genin turns and walks backwards for the last remainder of the journey so she can witness the looks on her teammates' faces when they see her genius idea. Once the trees thin into the clearing, she makes a grand sweeping gesture and says, *"Ta-da!"*

Silence.

Sakura blinks, surprised by the looks of confusion and uncertainty on the boys' faces. She was sure that Naruto at least would react with excitement, given his obsession with ramen. What gives…?

"Er, Sakura-shan," Naruto says uncertainly and points just over her shoulder. "Is that…supposed to be happening?"

"Huh?" Sakura whirls, and then lets out a cry of surprised rage at the scene before her.

Tanuki!

Indeed, five tanuki badgers are currently in the process of completely destroying her creation.

It's a *disaster.* Tomatoes strewn about with bites taken out of them, ramen cups torn open and the dried noodles broken and gnawed on, the words long, long gone.

The tanuki pay Sakura's fury absolutely no mind and continue munching on the remnants of her hard work. She watches one take a single bite out of a big, beautiful tomato before tossing it over its shoulder and that snaps her out of her stunned daze.

Sakura lets out a wordless battle cry and rushes the small crowd of beasts. Four of the five scatter with a cacophony of chitters and

squeaks, but one holds its ground.

Sakura skids to a halt, hands raised as she squares up with the tanuki. She can see now it's bigger than the others were, and has a brutal scar in the place of one eye. It's also wearing a necklace of large round beads and magatama, almost like a rosary.

He must be the boss, she surmises. Then, *wait, are these regular tanuki…?*

There's a beat, before the tanuki makes a break for it. Sakura tries to head him off, but the badger feints and spins, deftly dodging her grasping hands. Then it lunges, surprising her so much she stumbles backwards with a squeak.

Her guard breached, Sakura tries to regain her balance while the tanuki scrambles up her front, little claws digging for purchase in her shirt and skin. He then uses her forehead like a launchpad, kicking off with all four paws. The force of the jump knocks Sakura onto her butt, and she goes down with a yelp.

There's the distinct sound of a creature disappearing into the underbrush, and then…silence.

Dazed, Sakura can only stare at the mess in front of her. *What… what just happened?*

The silence continues for another few seconds before Naruto's loud guffaws shatter it. Sakura looks over her shoulder to see the blond in stitches, almost brought to his knees by how hard he's laughing. She's about to make an effort at explaining and rescuing her dignity (unlikely, but what the hell) but another sight makes her freeze.

Is that…could it be…?

Sasuke is looking away, one hand fisted in front of his mouth. Much more importantly, however, is the minute shaking of his shoulders, the way his eyes are narrowed with genuine amusement.

Sakura's bad ear and Naruto's loud cackles make it impossible to hear him, so Sakura instinctively channels a little bit of chakra to her auditory system. The result is still so quiet it's almost inaudible, but it's there, and it's real.

Sasuke is *laughing.*

The sound turns Sakura's world on its head. *Oh my god. Sasuke is actually laughing.*

Unbidden, a snort finds its way out of her own mouth, followed by a poorly-restrained giggle. The *joy* that lights up in Sakura's chest is so warm and bright and all-encompassing that she too collapses into helpless peals of laughter. It chases away the lingering anxiety in her chest, warming the parts of her that had been icy with fear ever since her fight with her teammates. She laughs and laughs and laughs.

Several long moments pass, filled with nothing but the sound of Team Seven's mirth. Eventually, as the giggles begin to die down, another presence makes itself known.

"If you all are done terrorizing local fauna and plotting to overthrow the current government, there's someone who'd like to speak to you."

Sakura startles as Naruto squawks, *"Kakashi-sensei!"* And sure enough, the silver-haired jōnin descends from a nearby tree, landing with barely a tremble of the grass blades beneath his sandals.

But Sakura is way more focused on something else. "Sensei, your hair!"

Sure enough, it would appear as though their teacher took her suggestion and got the other side of his head shaved, leaving the top and back longer and shaggy as before. It makes him look a little edgy, and dare she say it…cool.

“Well, I figured I’d be lop-sided if I left it. Maybe even start walking at an angle,” he says with a shrug. “Could make combat tricky.”

Sakura snorts, though she’s internally quite delighted. That Kakashi-sensei thought high enough of her opinion to heed her suggestion… even if it was a whim, it makes her happy. Maybe her place on this team isn’t so tenuous after all.

“Looks the same to me,” Naruto squints at him critically. “But who cares! Sensei, who wants to see us?”

Sensei just gives them a guileless eye-smile. “Come with me and find out.”

Then he seems to pause for a moment. “Well, clean that up first. Team Seven doesn’t litter.”

“Kimura-san!”

Sakura forgets all propriety and rushes forward towards the woman, who is sitting upright in a veritable throne of pillows on a fancy-looking medical bed.

“Haruno-san, I am so very happy to see you,” Kimura-san greets, taking Sakura’s outreaching hands into her own and holding them close. “Welcome home.”

Sakura feels tears well up for like the billionth time in the last two days, which is annoying but she’s gonna focus on the positives right now. For example, that Kimura-san and her baby are okay! It’s a delightful surprise, and Sakura thinks she can forgive sensei for not preparing them.

Indeed, Kakashi-sensei had led the genin members of his team wordlessly into the village, past the bustling downtown area and towards the quieter, wealthier neighborhood that Sakura isn’t very familiar with. They followed him like the obedient ducklings they are,

down a few winding streets of low-seated walls and pleasingly-trimmed sakura trees until they stopped at a large, elegant and traditional-looking home. Sakura had felt deeply out of place in her ratty T-shirt and not a whisper of makeup or hair product to be seen.

But that hardly matters now because Kimura-san is here and safe and smiling at her.

“You’re really okay, Kimura-san?” Sakura asks, clutching Kimura-san’s hands tightly. “You and the baby?”

“Right as rain,” she answers with a happy smile. “And I think after everything, you are more than welcome to call me Nobuko.”

Sakura grins, elated, and can’t help but hop up and down with excitement. “And you can call me Sakura!”

Nobuko returns her smile before glancing over her shoulder. “And this is Yoshida Yuu, my fiancé.”

Sakura startles, somehow having completely missed the fact that there is a whole human man standing on the other side of the bed. What was it that sensei said about shinobi and situational awareness…?

Whatever.

He’s handsome in a fine way, high cheekbones and a slender jaw. Kind green eyes. His shiny black hair is pulled into a low ponytail, and his clothes, while simple and traditional, are clearly very well made and expensive.

“I am honored to meet the shinobi who saved Nobuko,” the man says, addressing her whole team as he dips his chin in deference. “I cannot thank your team enough for bringing her back to me safely.”

Sakura flaps her hands, unaccustomed to such direct gratitude. “It’s no problem—"

But he’s not finished. “And you, Haruno-kun, have my deepest gratitude. Without your courage and sacrifice, I fear she would have been lost to me forever.”

He bends into a deep bow, stunning Sakura so much that she just stares with a slack jaw.

This… this man is the cousin of the actual Fire Daimyo and thus literal royalty. And he just bowed to her like she was the important one.

Sakura returns the bow, suddenly flustered. “I’m just happy that everyone made it out okay!”

Then something occurs to her, and she gasps. “Wait—fiancé!?”

Nobuko giggles at her awed excitement, before nodding a little shyly. “As soon as we were reunited, he asked me to marry him. Of course I said yes!”

Sakura squeals. Married!! To her quasi-princely boyfriend! After a daring rescue! It really is something out of a fairytale!

“Congratulations, Nobuko!” She says, tears (of joy this time, thankfully) gathering in her eyes. “Will you be moving to Konoha, then? Or the capital, I guess?”

A strange expression flits over Nobuko’s face, though it doesn’t seem negative in nature.

“It’s…well, I’m not sure,” Nobuko answers, before turning to look up at her fiancé.

“Since Yuu abdicated his position as a senior aid to the daimyo in order to get engaged to me, we were originally planning to move back to eastern Fire, perhaps Tsurui, to start a homestead, but–”

“Abdicate? Why?” Sakura interjects, unable to help her curiosity.

This time, Yoshida-sama is the one who answers. “Some terrible archaic traditions about marriage and noble heritage. But none of that matters to me, as long as I can be with Nobuko.” He bends to drop a sweet kiss on the crown of the woman’s head.

Sakura all but swoons while Naruto makes a *blech!* noise somewhere behind her. She ignores him.

“However, right after I submitted my intent to abdicate to his highness the daimyo, some…matters came to light,” the man continues, one hand settling on Nobuko’s back.

Now, it is Kakashi-sensei who interjects. “Investigators were sent to the mill after Abe vanished, and found the late Abe-oji-san’s will,” he says, arms crossed in front of him. “Turns out he left *everything* to Kimura-san, here. She is now the rightful owner–and has been, this whole time–of the largest steel mill in Fire.”

Sakura gapes. “Whoa!”

Yoshida-sama’s expression becomes a little sardonic. “Interestingly, my family informed me soon after that they have decided to adopt a more progressive stance on marriage and that they would happily welcome Nobuko and our child into the family.”

Sakura’s stomach churns with the realization. “...ah.”

“Ah, indeed,” he agrees. “Evidently, wealth is an acceptable substitute for blood.”

Sakura…isn’t sure how she feels about that. Both from the perspective of their marriage only being accepted because of Nobuko’s sudden wealth *and* the fact that the largest steel mill in Konoha will become an asset of the daimyo’s family. As if they didn’t have enough power and money already.

“Huh,” she eventually says in a hopefully neutral tone of voice. “Well, it’s stupid they were going to disown you for that, but I’m glad it

worked out in the end."

Yoshida-sama looks troubled. "Yes, I suppose."

At the very least, his concern is reassuring. It makes Sakura feel like she can trust his love for Nobuko is real.

"So…you'll live in Tetsugawa instead?" She wonders. Where does Yoshida live, anyway? As a senior aid to the daimyo, he must reside in the capital, she muses.

"At least temporarily," Nobuko answers. "That… *man* all but gutted the infrastructure of the mill, and I'll need to spend some dedicated time getting everything back up to code again while training my replacement at the same time."

Sakura nods, that all makes sense. She's very glad to hear the pollution issues will get fixed up. But there is one thing…

"Does that mean you'll have to live separately?" she asks, suddenly anxious at the prospect. "Since Yoshida-sama is still working for the daimyo?"

"Yeah, yeah! Aren't you worried about that creepy dude showing up and making trouble?" Naruto adds, voicing Sakura's remaining thoughts before she can.

Yoshida-sama's smile is sharper this time. "I will be wherever Nobuko is. Daichi is understanding of that."

Sakura is confused for a moment about who he may be referring to, before it strikes her that the freaking *daimyo's* name is Yoshida Daichi. And this man just used his *first name,* and so casually! Suddenly, the status of the man in front of her feels way more daunting. Sakura fidgets with her hair.

"One distinct benefit of having my family's support of our marriage," Yoshida-sama continues, "Is access to their exceptional protection

detail. We will be well-guarded. Also, you may call me Yuu."

Sakura's belly swoops with relief. "That's great…uh, Yuu…sama."

"Speaking of marriage," Nobuko pipes up, her words brimming with excitement. "I'd like to formally invite you all to the wedding."

Sakura gasps, any and all nobility- and weapons market monopoly-related concerns evaporating instantly. "Really?!"

"Of course!" Nobuko laughs. "You saved my life. I would be honored to have your team attend."

Sakura squeals, hopping up and down with glee. A wedding! A *royal* wedding! She whirls on her team. "We'll be there, right?!"

Naruto is nodding, appearing a combination of confused but excited. Sasuke's expression is one of curiosity, but he also nods. Kakashi-sensei just looks bored.

She turns back to Nobuko, nodding firmly. "We'll be there."

Team Seven spends a little while longer visiting Nobuko, chatting about this and that. Sakura can't help herself and keeps directing the conversation back to the wedding by way of asking questions. She's just so excited! She's never been to a wedding before, let alone a fancy one!

As it turns out, the wedding will be happening quite soon—it needs to, before the baby is born. Just two months away, in fact. The exchanging of vows and sharing of sake cups will take place in a secluded shrine outside of Konoha, near to one of the daimyo's vacation estates. The ceremony will be relatively small, with just the daimyo's family, the clan heads of Konoha, and a few other special guests as part of the procession (along with the bride and groom, of course).

Conversely, the reception—to be held in Konoha the following day—will be *massive,* a huge bash with high-ranked attendees from all over the world.

“It *is* unusual for the mere cousin of the daimyo to receive such an honor,” Yuu-sama explains to a wide-eyed Team Seven. “But my cousin is very shrewd. I believe the event will serve as something of a preamble to the chūnin exams, wherein many foreign aristocrats will already be in Fire country.”

Sakura blinks, nodding, though she's unsure how that could relate to any shrewdness. She doesn’t remember much about those exams—Iruka-sensei had mentioned them in passing during the academy—other than that Hidden Villages take turns hosting them and that they’re one of the ways to progress from genin to chūnin rank.

Kakashi-sensei makes a noise of understanding. “Ah. A chance for the Land of Fire to show off her riches, before demonstrating her power,” he murmurs.

Yuu-sama nods. “An ostentatious display at the exams would look frivolous, but truly there is no greater opportunity for the extreme and superfluous flaunting of wealth than a wedding, no?”

Sakura watches as her sensei nods, before he sighs, abruptly looking a little exhausted. Something about this conversation has vexed him, and Sakura can only wonder what.

At that moment, Nobuko lets out a jaw-cracking yawn, and Kakashi-sensei apparently takes that as the cue to leave. He claps his hands once and announces that they really ought to be going. And while Sakura wishes she could stay longer and chat more, they really should allow the exhausted mother-to-be to sleep.

Nobuko and Sakura hug no fewer than three times before Team Seven finally takes their leave.

“Thank you again, for everything,” the woman says sincerely. “I’m looking forward to seeing you all again soon!”

Yuu-sama sees them all of the way to the front gate of the estate, graciously waving off the attendants who seem a little confused by him taking on such an endeavor.

Before they can depart, Yuu-sama beckons Sakura to him briefly. Curious, she steps close, finding herself startled by how intently he’s regarding her.

“Haruno-kun,” he murmurs, going so far as to *kneel in the dirt* so they may be eye-level. “One last time, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to you for your actions in Tetsugawa. They saved the love of my life and my unborn child.”

Sakura flushes pink at the sincere praise, but he continues to speak before she can begin demuring.

“I am indebted to you in a way I cannot hope to ever truly repay,” Yuu-sama says quietly. “But please, If you need anything—and I mean anything—please contact me and I will do my utmost to see the request completed. Alright?”

Sakura can scarcely bring herself to nod, but manages it. “Alright.”

He returns the nod, before standing to his full height. His attention shifts, and his next words appear to be addressing her whole team.

“I shall send details regarding the wedding ceremony once I have them,” he announces with a nod. “Watch for my hawk, Shigemori. He has a silver cuff stamped with the Yoshida crest.”

And then he’s gone.

The four of them stare at the closed gate for a few long moments before Naruto shrugs and heads back down the road they came

from. Sasuke, never one to be left in the dust, hurries after him. A speed-walking competition ensues.

Sakura and Kakashi-sensei follow at a more sedate pace.

“I’ve never been to a wedding before,” Sakura comments idly.

“Me either.”

Sakura squints up at him. “Really?” she says skeptically. “Your hair tells me that you’re definitely old enough to have friends who got married. Maybe even divorced and remarried.”

A total lie, especially given sensei’s new haircut and outfit update. He looks young and even kinda cool. But she can’t let him know that, it’s the principle of the thing!

He gives her a mild glare and bops the back of her head with his knuckles. “I’m twenty-six.”

Sakura snickers, though internally she’s reeling at the revelation. *Twenty-six?! But he’s so mature and experienced and cool and… well, gray!*

“Maybe I’ll start calling you Kakashi-oji-san,” she muses instead of voicing any of those embarrassing thoughts.

“Brat,” Kakashi-sensei-grumbles, and scruffs her by the back of her shirt so he can shake her like a puppy.

“You better not mess with me,” Sakura warns, swallowing her giggles to kick out at him from her dangling position. “I’ve got a favor I can call in with the bigwigs now!”

He catches both ankles in one hand, leaving her strung up like a fresh-caught marlin. *Okay well that backfired.*

“I’m shaking in my boots,” Kakashi-sensei deadpans.

“You don’t even wear boots,” Sakura retorts, before twisting one leg so she can pinch some of sensei’s arm between her big and second toe, and *hard.* Because, y’know. Also no boots.

“Gah!” sensei cries, releasing both of her ankles. “So mean to your beloved teacher!” He sounds aghast, and lets go of her shirt too.

Sakura lands lightly on her feet and sticks her tongue out at him. Then a little impulsively, she says, “You looked kinda worried for a sec earlier, when we were talking to Nobuko. What was that about?”

He freezes briefly before his body language loosens. “Can’t get anything past you, huh,” Kakashi-sensei mutters, apparently rhetorically. He rubs the back of his neck, gaze shifting up and off as if in thought.

“Sensei…?”

“This whole…courageous rescue, fancy wedding situation,” he says, waving a hand to indicate all that has transpired over the last several days. “It’s not exactly going to help with keeping a lid on your reputation.”

Sakura swallows, her stomach turning to ice. “Oh.”

“On the other hand, you’ve got some pretty good friends in some pretty high places, now,” he adds, sounding thoughtful. “That’s nothing to sniff at. In the end, I’d say it comes out as a net positive, actually.”

Sakura sighs with relief. “That’s good–”

But sensei isn’t finished, and his expression darkens with consternation again. “Although *technically,* there is a small but non-zero chance you could end up in a bingo book, since you tangled with those nuke-nin.”

Tangled is an awfully cute way of rephrasing murder, Sakura thinks numbly.

But who cares about that?! Sakura is way, way more concerned with —

“B-buh-*bingo book?!”*

Sakura shifts, curling up tighter and pulling her duvet up and over her ears. Hm. Nope, still not right.

She rolls over onto her other side and adopts a half-splayed position. Still no good.

She lies flat on her stomach. Nope. Then on her back, fingers interlaced on her belly. Also no.

Sakura …Sakura just can’t sleep!

Apparently the compounded excitement of the day (and there was a lot, thank you) wasn’t enough to drain Sakura of her jittery energy. Jumpy and restless, all she can do is toss and turn in her big fluffy bed.

Shiba and Bull, her ninken guests for the night, gave up on dealing with her fussing a while ago and are simply snoring away on her floor. Sakura eyes them enviously, wishing desperately that she too could be snoozing away. She’s *so, so* tired, but it seems like no matter how many mugs of cozy tea she drinks or how many pages she reads of the world’s most boring book on types of wood-rot… sleep just will not come.

Her body feels…odd. Not painful, but just a little bit uncomfortable, like when the sleeve of your shirt gets wadded up in your jacket sleeve when you pull it on. Even her gums feel weird, almost tender. *Some kind of tooth infection? But that would be more obvious, wouldn’t it?*

To make matters worse, Sakura must have accidentally used way too much detergent when she last cleaned her bedding because the smell of floral soap is almost overwhelming. It makes her head feel too tight and her skin feel too small, with every overblown sensation like sandpaper against the back of her brain. *This is awful.*

It's only once the genin figures out how to dull her sense of smell with chakra that she's able to relax, grateful that she'd had some practice with sense reduction back in the cave. The trick is enough to nudge Sakura past the precipice of wakefulness, and she falls into an uneasy sleep.

Of course, Sakura wakes again and again, irritated into consciousness by the restlessness of her legs and the onslaught of detergent-smell. Her longest sleeping spell is but two hours, and it is rudely ended by the insistent blaring of her alarm.

"At least I didn't have any nightmares," Sakura grumbles. Her mouth feels fuzzy and thick from sleep, the words slurring together. She rubs her jaw and clambers out of bed. *I probably never even got close to REM sleep.*

On top of that, Sakura's temples and jaw feel tight, like she spent the whole night clenching her teeth. The insides of her cheeks even feel a little raw, in addition to the still-sensitive gums. Sakura runs her tongue experimentally over the soft tissue of her cheek to probe for more damage and then freezes.

What…what was that?

Hesitantly, Sakura pokes closer to the front of her mouth this time. There's…something missing. In fact, there are several things missing. She uses her fingers to check this time, certain it must be her imagination, but…no.

Sakura makes a mad dash to the bathroom, her heart galloping. *What? What is happening?!*

Sakura braces herself on the edge of the sink so she can lean into the mirror, and with a shuddering breath, pulls her lips back to reveal her teeth.

And then Sakura screams.

LOOOL i just keep putting this damn kid through it, don't i? sorry saku, you're just too fun to mess with!!

also yea that's right i GAVE KAKASHI A MULLET AND YOU CAN'T STOP MEEEEE

and as always, comments make my day and fuel my writing. thanks for reading!!

next time: sakura makes a new friend and team 7 training goes turbo mode!

Growing pains

Chapter 17: Growing pains

BONJOUR HELLO HAPPY SUMMER (BELATEDLY)

life has been very busy lately!! in good ways (i am getting married!) in bad ways (mom is still dying of a terrible disease!) in kind of neutral ways (work is workin!) but i am still finding time to put this story together because i love it so very much. and i love you guys so very much!!! you always leave the kindest, most encouraging comments, and for that i am so so so grateful.

one thing; this chapter ended up getting split into 2 chaps because i added a huge chunk in the middle and having a chapter over 10k words is just...a lot. it felt too meandering. so no training montage in this one, sorry folks! that'll be next time :)

instead, mooooore chakra lore/worldbuilding and lots of team 7 bonding.

as always, huge thanks to my beta, anxiousgrimalkin.

pls enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“Sakura? Sakura, can you please open the door?”

“Go *away!”*

Sakura hunches further, having shoved herself into the corner of the bathroom, a towel tugged down firmly over her head. No one, no one can see her like this! Not ever!

The voice—sensei's voice—remains gentle as he presses, "Sakura, I'd like to talk to you. I think I can help. Would you please open the door?"

"No!" Sakura shrieks, pulling the towel down even more tightly. Maybe if she pulls hard enough, she'll simply fold into nothingness and disappear.

She can hear him sigh, though it sounds more sad than frustrated.

The next voice that comes through the door is Pakkun's. "I'll let you touch my super-soft paw pads if you come out."

"I don't care," Sakura responds sullenly. "Just leave me alone."

"Alright, how about this: Boss got you new arm-guards. If you come out, he'll give them to you."

That news piques Sakura's interest the tiniest bit…but only for a moment and then her mood sours again. "I'm still in my pajamas," she ends up saying, for a lack of a better denial.

"You can borrow my sweatshirt."

Kakashi-sensei's voice this time. Despite herself, Sakura is more intrigued by this offer. She *does* like stealing other people's clothes; there's a certain possessive satisfaction to it. Many a time has she covetously eyed Sasuke's hanten, sensei's jacket, or even Naruto's windbreaker. She likes it when she smells like them, and they smell like her.

Sakura mulls it over for a few long moments. After all, maybe sensei *can* help. At the very, very least maybe he can help her find a mask to cover up her newfound ugliness.

"Fine," she grumbles. "But close your eyes when I come out."

What ugliness? Oh, just the fact that Sakura woke up to find her upper and lower canines *completely missing from her mouth.* Four

whole, healthy, adult teeth vanished overnight. Beyond the self-consciousness, Sakura is also just scared. Is there something wrong with her? Is she sick?

The genin's acquiescing words lisp over the S-sounds, whistling through the gaps in her teeth. It's almost enough to make her retract her decision to leave the bathroom, but she eventually powers through. Opening the door reveals a crouched Kakashi-sensei with his forehead protector pulled down over both eyes, while his hand covers Pakkun's. The other hand graciously extends sensei's black hoodie.

It's a funny enough sight to get an amused snort out of Sakura, and she pulls the hoodie on quickly. The hem of it reaches her knees, and the sleeves are long and drapey enough on her to resemble those of a kimono, and she can use them to cover the bottom half of her face. Almost like some kind of coy courtier lady…rather than a *toothless weirdo.*

"You can look now," Sakura allows, her words a little muffled by the sleeve she's holding up to her mouth. The sweatshirt has the bonus effect of smelling good without being overwhelming, and the genin allows herself a moment to relax the rigid hold on the chakra in her nose.

Kakashi-sensei pushes his forehead-protector back into its usual place and levels her with a sympathetic expression. God, she must look so pathetic.

"Hey kid," he greets, his tone gentle. "Heard you had a bit of a nasty surprise this morning."

Sakura grunts her acknowledgement, unable to meet his eyes for more than a moment.

"Want to come to my place to talk about it?" he offers. "I use unscented soaps, and I can set up some air-purifying seals to reduce the intensity of smells. It might help alleviate your nose situation."

Sakura blinks, her embarrassment briefly abated by curiosity. *Scent-reducing seals?* she wonders. That sounds very helpful.

“Okay,” she agrees, sounding miserable even to her own ears.

He regards her for a moment, before offering his arms. “Do you want a ride?”

Sakura considers it before shaking her head. She feels pathetic enough already. Maybe stretching her legs will help clear her head.

“But catch me if I fall, okay?” she adds as an afterthought.

“Fall?” sensei echoes, but Sakura is already heading downstairs towards the genkan to get her shoes. She thanks the gods that both of her parents had left early for work that morning and are thus ignorant to her current woes. She can’t even imagine how much they would worry.

Kakashi-sensei and Pakkun follow her silently and wait patiently as she pulls on her sandals and grabs a small backpack. They remain silent as she locks the front door and ties her hair into its customary half-ponytail. It’s only when she takes a deep inhale, standing on the edge of the wooden stoop, and floods her body with chakra that sensei begins to speak.

“Sakura–”

But she’s off like a shot, propelling herself to the roofs with a chakra-boosted leap. The muscles in her left thigh protest immediately, already beginning to cramp. The packet of PT instructions—currently sitting on her bathroom counter—emphasized that doing her stretches first thing in the morning would be key to avoiding this sort of thing.

Well, too bad, Sakura sneers internally. She sends analgesic chakra to control the pain, which does in fact work—a little too well. When she lands on a nearby roof, Sakura’s left leg buckles immediately

because her quadricep muscles have been numbed to the point of uselessness.

The genin curses under her breath and re-shapes the chakra in her leg again. The pain is back, but manageable, and she's able to put weight on it again.

Sakura can feel Kakashi-sensei hovering in her periphery and finds herself irritated by his concern. She can handle herself. Sakura doesn't need saving!

She kicks off again, heading in the direction she knows Kakashi-sensei's apartment to be in. The journey is an embarrassingly clumsy process, thanks to her stupid leg, and by the time she reaches his nondescript building, Sakura's left leg muscles are so locked up they're hard and hot to the touch.

Great, just great, she looks down at the offending appendage. If this is her future, there's no way she can fight. Well, if she ignores her PT, anyway.

It is in a sullen silence that Sakura follows Kakashi-sensei into his apartment. She gets to use the front door this time, instead of the window. Her mood is too sour to enjoy it.

"You get started on your PT exercises, and I'll make us some tea," sensei says as he toes off his sandals.

"I don't have my packet," Sakura mutters, remembering to cover her mouth this time.

Kakashi-sensei is already heading towards his kitchen and dumping his green jacket on a chair. "Sure, but I know your brain. You memorized them already."

…dang it. He's right, too.

Sullenly, Sakura plops down next to his kotatsu to get going on her stretches. She's made it through a handful (and yes, her leg feels way better already, screw you) when he returns with two steaming earthenware mugs. Whatever is in them smells herbaceous but not like any tea she's had before.

"This is a special tea," he explains, setting one down on the side of the kotatsu nearest to her. "It's made from magnolia bark, green dragon leaves, and ginger. The anti-inflammatory effect will help with the tenderness of your gums."

Sakura watches him with narrowed eyes. "How do you know my gums hurt?" She had definitely been yelling that morning about her teeth—hence why the ninken went and fetched sensei in the first place—but she's pretty sure gums never came up. Now that she's thinking about it, Sakura is pretty sure she never mentioned the smell thing either.

He sighs. "Because I went through exactly what you're going through when I first signed my contract with the ninken."

Sakura gasps and abandons her stretching to scooch over to the kotatsu. "Really?"

Kakashi-sensei nods. "Yup. Unfortunately, the transference thing isn't instantaneous, though it is quick once it starts. Your new teeth will probably have grown in after a day or two, and I imagine your sense of smell will settle down around the same time."

But Sakura is only paying attention to one part of that sentence. "New *teeth?"*

"New teeth," he confirms. "Your canines will regrow to be more… well, canine."

Abruptly, Sakura thinks back to months ago, when Akino had yawned during one of their morning play-times. She'd admired his

sharp teeth, thinking they must be useful. *Be careful what you wish for, huh.*

But that doesn't sound too bad, she attempts to reason with herself. In fact, maybe it'll be kinda cool! She'd always secretly thought Kiba's fangs were rather dashing in a wild, rakish sort of way.

Although…what if she can never speak normally? What if she talks with a lisp for the rest of her life? What if they grow back as huge tusks?! Combined with her forehead, Sakura will look like a monster!

Sensing her sudden spiral, Kakashi-sensei plops a hand onto her head. "I know it's a lot," he murmurs. "But you're tough, and I'm here to talk you through whatever happens."

Sakura sniffles, not very convinced, and takes a small, sad sip of her tea. What if she goes gray, too? Forget "billboard brow," people are going to start calling her onibaba. And she'll deserve it!

Sensei retracts his hand, observing her for a second. Several equally inscrutable expressions cross the visible portion of his face, and then he mumbles, "Oh, what the hell," and pulls down his mask.

…Wait. *Pulls down his mask.*

Sakura's jaw drops, briefly forgetting her toothlessness in her complete shock.

He grins at her, revealing his own pointed canines. "See these?" Kakashi-sensei cajoles. "Not so bad."

Sensei's face. It's sensei's *face.* It's sensei's face and he's…he's cute as hell! *No!*

Indeed, Kakashi-sensei's face is almost exactly as Pakkun had described it back in the cave. A strong, sharp jaw. The little scar on his right cheek. A beauty mark to the lower left of his lips. When he

speaks, she can see a flash of metal behind his teeth—oh my god the *freaking tongue piercing.*

He's cute. He's *so* cute. It's amazing. It's horrible. Sakura can never look him in the eye again.

"P-put that away!" she commands, flapping her hands at him in a frenzy.

"Put what away?" He looks confused, head cocking to one side like a puppy. Oh my god. *Oh my god.*

"Your *face!"* Sakura cries. "Put it away!"

The expression—fully visible because his *mask is gone, what the hell* —on his face becomes faux-hurt, though the mischief in his eyes glitters clearly. "So mean, Sakura," he accuses, but he pulls the mask back up to its usual position.

Immediately, Sakura begins to regret her hastiness. He really is quite cute…and staring at pretty people is kinda one of her favorite pastimes. And more than that, this is the ultimate gloating rights! She can lord this over Naruto and Sasuke forever!

Face absolutely aflame, Sakura focuses all of her attention on the tea in her hands and mutters, "I…you can leave it off. This is *your* apartment after all."

"You sure?" He deadpans.

Sakura looks away. "Do whatever you want."

Kakashi-sensei sighs gustily as if in relief. "Great, because drinking hot tea through a mask is terrible."

He tugs the fabric back down again to take a sip, and Sakura is pretty sure there is literal steam rising from her cheeks. *It's a good thing sensei wears a mask,* she thinks a little hysterically. *The women of Konoha would riot if they knew what he looked like.*

They sip their tea in companionable (if a little awkward on Sakura's end) silence. Once the novel insanity of Kakashi-sensei’s face begins to dim, Sakura can feel some of the tension leave her shoulders.

Sighing, she leans forward to rest her cheek on the cool, smooth wood of the kotatsu-top. “So, why teeth?”

“Why teeth?”

Sakura nods against the wood. “Yeah, it just seems so random. Why not fur or–” She gasps, cutting herself off. “Wait, I’m not gonna grow *claws* am I?!” Not even her prettiest coral-pink nail polish could save her!

Kakashi-sensei hums thoughtfully. “To answer your first question, I’m not sure. I don’t think the mechanism behind transference is very well understood. In my experience, only relatively generic traits can be shared, like sharper teeth or a keener sense of smell, better chakra control, that sort of thing.”

Sakura’s brow wrinkles in thought. “Oh, so no kekkei-genkai can be transferred?” she mutters. So much for her genetic cheat-code theory then.

“Correct.”

“But the shared traits are useful, not just random.”

“To my knowledge, yes.”

That seems…oddly esoteric and arbitrary.

“Can you dictate the traits in the contract?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Weird.”

“Hm.”

What a bizarre system. It’s similar to how evolution works—adaptive traits being passed on—but the selective pressure is almost endogenous, rather than external. That’s practically the *antithesis* of evolution. Not to mention the almost-randomness.

Then again, what is evolution but the result of random events selecting for advantageous traits? Can chakra synthetically replicate millions of years of evolution through a contract? How? *Why?*

Because signing a contract has altered her phenotypic expression, to the extent of giving her canid characteristics, has her DNA been changed? Is it permanent—as in, what happens if she breaks the contract?

So many questions, and absolutely no answers. Time for a trip to the library, it seems. And maybe a shrine. Sakura has never been particularly spiritual, but her experiences lately are kinda making her think that there might be some higher powers pulling the strings. It’s all way too…intentional.

“Unfortunately, any texts that go into a level of detail you would be interested in are likely in the private collection of a clan, not the village library.”

Sakura pouts, both annoyed that she’d been muttering aloud again and that her access to literature is being hampered by her clanlessness. “Ugh.”

She hears Kakashi-sensei sigh, and then, “I haven’t been to the Hatake compound in a long time, but I’m pretty sure we have some scrolls on summoning. I’ll drop by one of these days to pick them up for you.”

For the second time this morning, Sakura’s spirits brighten considerably. “Really?” Then she pauses and squints at him skeptically. “Wait, what compound? Don’t you live in this apartment?”

He sighs again. “I do, but the Hatake clan used to be more than just me. Our compound is pretty measly compared to, say, the Hyuga’s, but it’s decently sized.”

“Who lives there now?”

“Nobody.”

Sakura feels a tug of anxiety in her gut, even though she has no personal investment in this place. “Aren’t you worried it’s been…I dunno, broken into?”

“Our land is right next to the Nara, and they’re not very kind to trespassers.”

The genin feels herself relax again. “Oh, okay.”

They lull into a companionable silence, but something in the back of Sakura’s mind begins to itch in addition to her gums.

“Hey, sensei?” she asks, letting the words tumble out before she can think too hard about them. “I should probably tell the boys about this, right?”

He’s quiet for a moment before, “Sooner rather than later, sure.”

“I…I don’t want to hide this from them,” she continues in a mutter, fiddling with the sleeve of the sweatshirt she’s wearing.

Her teacher makes a thoughtful noise. “It will likely come up in combat at some point, and the tantrums that would follow if we kept them in the dark until then would be unfortunate.”

Ha, ain’t that the truth. Plus, Sakura is already in a trust deficit with her teammates…she wants to start this new chapter with them on the right foot.

There’s one more thing, too.

“Also.” Sakura swallows audibly. “I still need to talk to someone about the cave.”

Her missing teeth make the words come out more like *I thtill need to talk to thomeone about the cave* . Gods above, it’s mortifying.

Kakashi-sensei nods.

“Would this count?”

He nods again.

She sighs. *Start at rock bottom,* she tells herself. *And everything after is up.*

“Okay. Would you go get them for me?”

“Yes ma’am.”

They start with explaining the summoning contract and transference.

The information is received mostly to the tune of stunned silence, with the occasional interjection of *what?!* or *no way!* as they all sit at Kakashi-sensei’s kotatsu. It should be a wholesome sight—the three of them practically knee to knee, shoulder to shoulder, huddled together over a bowl of tangerines that Kakashi-sensei inexplicably brought back with him in addition to the boys—but Sakura is too anxious and agitated to appreciate the domesticity.

Sakura lets Kakashi-sensei do all of the explaining, at one point giving the boys a lightning-quick view of her lacking smile. He’d pulled his mask on before leaving to fetch them, which Sakura had been disappointed by, but had pulled it back down readily enough when detailing his own experience with transference.

The boys crow in shock and awe at his face, much like she had, though now in a somewhat clearer state of mind, Sakura can see the

act for what it is—a demonstration of trust. Some small part of her is a little bummed; she was looking forward to lording it over the boys. But somehow, having the secret to share is even better.

Then it's Sakura's turn.

Kakashi-sensei takes one look at her pinched expression and generously opts to offer a preamble.

"As you both already know, Sakura had two confirmed kills in the field while on our last mission," Kakashi-sensei begins. He receives two somber nods in return.

"Konoha protocol states that after a shinobi's first field kill they must speak with someone about it, either a counselor or a commanding officer. Sakura has opted for me and would like you both to be present as well."

Sakura watches the boys' faces closely for signs of resistance or revulsion. "Is that…okay with you guys?" she asks hesitantly.

But she needn't have even asked.

"Of course, Sakura-chan!" Naruto responds fiercely. "We wanna know what happened in there!"

Then he pauses, face scrunching, before adding, "Not in like a for-fun way, but in a we-wanna-support-you way!"

Sasuke nods his agreement before his hands begin to form familiar shapes. *"We can't go through what you went through, but we can listen,"* he signs. *"And try to learn from it too."*

Sakura's eyes well with tears, and she ducks her head down to suck in a few shaky, stabilizing breaths. She really does have the best team.

The memories are…oddly sparse and yet distinct, in that there are only fragments she can reliably conjure, but those that crystallize are

dreadfully lucid, almost shocking in their detail and clarity.

With one last deep breath, Sakura begins.

“After the rocks fell, I made a clone and put a few explosive tags under it before I hid on the ceiling. The two men appeared and triggered the trap. One got knocked out when he hit his head on the wall, but the other one evaded the blast.” Sakurs recites the opening events in a flat voice like she’s reading a grocery list, but her shoulders are already tensing up. They’re nearly at her ears. *And this is the easy part.*

“We fought hand-to-hand but he overpowered me. The one who evaded, um, the sandy-man, I mean,” Sakura continues, suddenly losing track of her own words. “I, uh, called him sandy-man in my head because he was covered in dirt from the other guy—the ponytail guy’s—earth technique, the one he used to get to the cave so quickly...”

Sakura glances up to see expressions that are mildly confused but encouraging. No one looks upset with her, but that stomach-dropping feeling she gets whenever someone is mad washes over Sakura anyway, and she swallows heavily. Her head feels fuzzy all of the sudden, and the genin shakes it like a dog ridding its fur of water, hoping to clear the white noise. Now worse, Sakura’s heart thud - *thuds* in her chest before hitting a rapid gallop, and her scalp prickles with heat. Her palms begin to sweat. *Why is this so hard?!*

Suddenly, there’s a tangerine in her hands.

Sakura blinks at it, stupefied, before looking up.

Naruto and Kakashi-sensei are regarding Sasuke with twin looks of surprise, and the boy crosses his arms, averting his eyes. “It’s for your hands. You like to fidget when you talk.” he explains in a mutter. The next words are signed, rather than spoken, *“I’m the same. Especially for difficult things.”*

Sakura's jaw drops, so touched by the thoughtful gesture that she again forgets about her missing teeth. "Thanks," she manages in a small voice.

Now, as Sakura speaks, her fingers systematically dismantle the tangerine peel. It's enough of a focus-point—the bumpy skin, the spray of bright citrus oil scent, the gentle precision required to peel without squishing—to occupy the fringes of her mind, the delicate edges that fray more easily. Her heart slows.

The words come more easily now.

"He overpowered me," Sakura repeats. "Then he tried to use the fireball technique on Pakkun-sensei but I, uh, jumped in the way. Turns out my heat-proofing technique actually works, whoda thunk?" She tries to make the words light, almost joking, but it falls flat. Oh well.

"There was smoke everywhere. I was able to sequester the energy into my arm, but it felt like it was gonna *explode."* Sakura's right hand clenches almost reflexively at the memory. The pressure-pain in her arm was unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

"Then…then sandy-man pinned me down and tried to strangle me," Sakura says in a low voice. "And I released the energy accidentally and the blast of steam boiled his face off. I think it must have cooked his lungs, too. He died a few minutes later."

Sakura's stomach roils at the memory of the man's face. It was so red, redder than anything she'd ever seen in her life, while his shiny, white teeth stood out in dreadful contrast. Like she'd turned him inside-out. A whole human face-–one that smiled and spoke and had a name, though she never learned it—reduced to raw meat, glistening with the juices of popped eyeballs. All because of Sakura.

There is a heavy silence for a few long beats. It gives the genin a moment to collect herself. Before anyone can comment—supportively or otherwise—she forges onward.

“I thought I was in the clear,” she admits, a wry smirk curling her lips now. “But the other guy woke up. We fought. He had this crazy earth-spear technique but it had a pretty limited range. I tried to draw him into a trap with more explosives, but he used a clone at the last second and I didn’t notice.”

Four exquisitely peeled tangerines sit in a pile before Sakura, but no one reaches for them. Understandable. Sakura’s doesn’t have much of an appetite right now, either.

She reaches for another fresh one.

“I had a realization,” she says, before pausing to consider. “Well, maybe that’s not the right word, because it kinda implies that it was a fact. I guess I came to a conclusion. I decided that I had to stop fighting like I was…”

Sakura swallows dryly. “Like I was going to get out of there alive.”

It’s this sentiment that elicits the first audible responses from Sakura’s audience.

From Sasuke, the hiss of a breath sucked in through clenched teeth. From Naruto, a quiet but alarmed *Sakura-chan…!*

Kakashi-sensei sighs, but his expression—still shockingly, shockingly bare of black fabric—appears somber, rather than irritated.

“Sasuke, do you remember when we sparred that first time, and I used chakra to stick your leg to me before I attacked?”

The boy takes a moment to respond, clearly not anticipating the non-sequitur. “I do.”

“I did the same thing with the ponytail guy,” Sakura explains. “Except he broke my femur when he kicked me, and then I stabbed him in the femoral artery.”

Sasuke's eyes widen. "You let him land the hit," he surmises.

Sakura nods. "It gave me an opening. He, uh…bled out pretty quickly."

"That's…smart," he says eventually. "Suicidal, but smart." The raven-haired boy's expression is pinched with concern, but there's a quirk to his mouth that speaks of admiration. She impressed him.

Sakura allows a shred of pride to settle in her belly, alongside all of the anxiety. It helps soothe the ice that grips her heart when she remembers ponytail-guy begging for help as the pool of blood around him grew and grew.

The narration of the makeshift traction splint is easier, and she keeps it brief. Sakura opts to leave out recounting the emotional messages she gave Pakkun to take back in the event of her not making it home. The genin does, however, explain in detail the way she figured out the summoning contract seals, because that was pretty freaking badass. Her teammates are suitably impressed.

"Then sensei signed it, and voila!" Sakura does some weak jazz-hands. "Home, just like that. Got the scar for a souvenir and everything."

Naruto is the first one to react. "Sakura-chan…" he says, voice breaking.

Sakura laughs hollowly, suddenly exhausted. "It's not so bad, right?" She jokes weakly. "I only cried like, a hundred times in that cave."

He doesn't answer that. "Can I…can I hug you?" The blond boy asks instead.

Sakura can't bring herself to speak, so she just opens her arms. Naruto lunges at her, and suddenly her whole world is warmth and wispy blond hair and the smell of *familyhomegoodsafe*—

“When they—when they died,” Sakura chokes out, all but smothering herself in Naruto’s orange windbreaker. “All I felt was *relief.* I didn’t really ever feel that bad and I—I just keep feeling *fine* and I dream about them, about the cave, and I wake up scared but then I’m fine again and I don’t—I don’t—”

I don’t want to be okay with killing people, Sakura can’t bring herself to say it. Being *capable* of it is one thing—she’s a shinobi after all, killing is like the first freaking bullet point on the job description—but her complete non-reaction, her ability to function normally like she didn’t end the lives of two people—it’s scary.

Almost silently, she asks into Naruto’s shoulder, *“What is wrong with me?”*

Kakashi-sensei is the one to answer. “I won’t claim to understand all of the finer details of your particular neuroses, Sakura—or anyone’s, we’re all a little nuts in this line of work—but I can tell you what it looks like to me,” he offers.

Sakura peeks up at her teacher, trying to blink away her tears. His visage remains stubbornly blurry. “Wh–what does it look like?”

“It looks like compartmentalization, which is a psychological defense mechanism,” he begins. Sakura nods. She remembers Pakkun mentioning the concept back in the cave, too.

“In short, you’re keeping two incompatible thoughts separate, which are: *I do not wish to kill people,* and *sometimes I must kill people.* The ability to have those concepts coexist without going completely insane is something that all shinobi must eventually be capable of. You just arrived at it more quickly than others your age typically do.”

Sakura blinks. “But how?”

He shrugs. “I can’t tell you that because I don’t know, but I would guess it’s related to your very high natural intellect. You also seem to

be…hm. How do I say this without being rude." The latter sentiment is muttered to himself, presumably rhetorical.

The genin shifts away from Naruto slightly, now deeply curious. "How do you say *what?"*

Her teacher squints at her in consideration for a moment before he shrugs. "Plainly, you're a little odd."

Sakura lets out a surprised, somewhat-offended laugh at the remark, while Naruto lets out a squawk of indignation on her behalf. Sasuke just snorts quietly, clearly amused.

"In my experience, most people are either more logically driven or more emotionally driven. Those on either ends of the spectrum can still be highly emotionally intelligent and-or pragmatic—they're not mutually exclusive—but their decision-making generally follows a pattern."

Sakura's head tilts to one side. "But I'm…right in the middle?" She hazards.

Sensei is already shaking his head in the negative. "It's more like you occupy both ends of the spectrum simultaneously. Some of your behavior is hyper-logical, other times it's much more emotional. You oscillate."

The thought makes Sakura frown. "That sounds like a nice way of saying unstable." *Or crazy.*

"And yet here you are, capable of functioning well under pressure, regularly demonstrating emotional growth, and with a strong instinct to do what's right. Seems awfully stable to me," he retorts, grinning at her, his pointed canines glinting.

Sakura's jaw drops at the frank praise, totally floored. Also, since when was sensei so perceptive?!

“You’re just a sentimental cynic,” Kakashi-sensei finishes with a shrug. “Aware of the harsh realities of the world, but smart enough to try and enjoy the beauty in it anyway. Honestly, it reminds me a lot of Gai. He was the one who taught me that whimsy is a choice.”

Awed silence follows.

“Sensei, you talk *way* more without the mask,” Naruto comments, voicing Sakura’s thoughts before she can. “I like it!”

“Of course I do,” Kakashi-sensei snorts. “Yapping a lot with the mask on makes it smell like spit.”

Sakura cringes, disgusted, but Naruto laughs with delight while Sasuke smirks. *Ugh, boys!*

Thereafter Naruto begins pestering Kakashi-sensei for his own psycho-emotional evaluation, who provides it readily enough. Predictably, he grades Naruto as being more emotionally driven, but what *is* surprising is that Sasuke receives the same appraisal. Then again, Sasuke can be pretty moody, she reasons. Naruto is just more outwardly, instantaneously reactive, whereas Sasuke simmers silently before he boils over.

It’s while turning these thoughts over in her head that Sakura’s eyelids begin to droop. After such a rollercoaster, it suddenly feels like her tank is absolutely empty. She leans forward to lay her cheek on the cool wood of the kotatsu top. *I’ll just rest my eyes for a minute…*

And thus, Sakura falls asleep at Kakashi-sensei’s kotatsu. She doesn’t dream.

She wakes a few hours later in a mild panic, but Pakkun is there to talk her down. Apparently, it’s late afternoon, and sensei left some time ago to deliver the boys to their respective homes. Sakura’s orders are to head home whenever she wants.

Sakura mulls the instructions over, running her tongue against the gaps in her teeth. To her absolute surprise, there are already the tips of new, sharper cuspids beginning to poke through her gums. *Well dang.* Looks like she might have teeth by tomorrow after all.

Sakura tries not to let that freak her out so much.

Ultimately, the genin decides to head home and attempt to sleep once again, since it appears to expedite the transference a bit. She shucks off Kakashi-sensei's sweatshirt and leaves it folded up on his kotatsu with a thank you sticky-note left on top. She wants desperately to take it with her but knows that would be weird.

(Some fraction of Sakura's mind is beginning to worry how she's going to handle having crushes on two-thirds of her team.

Whatever. That's a problem for future-Sakura.)

But before the genin can exit via the window (it just feels weird to use the front door), Pakkun stays her with a waved paw.

"Boss said to give you these to take home with you," he says, trotting to the kitchen to retrieve a little brown bag. "The arm guards are in there, plus something he said would help with your teeth."

Sakura flushes, overwhelmed with gratitude and the distinct, nervous joy of being given something by someone you regard highly. What could it be? More of that helpful tea? A different sweatshirt to steal? Finally, her owed lifetime supply of anmitsu?

Her cheeks pink with pleasure, Sakura opens the bag to find a pair of arm-guards, almost identical to her old ones. In fact, it looks like he had the metal plates from the old pair buffed up and reused, because some of the patches of discoloration look familiar. The only discernible difference is that the new black fabric has almost a blue-green sheen to it. *Pretty,* she thinks in awe.

Grinning, the genin slips them on. It's a perfect fit. She's actually glad he reused the old metal; both from a recycling standpoint *and* because the older set had become quite precious to Sakura without her realizing it.

After she gets the arm-guards on, Sakura digs her hand back into the bag to find the next item. It's… *the necklace!*

Sure enough, Zabuza's gift—a freaking *living thing* apparently—emerges from the bag. The matte blue scale-like thing sits motionless in her palm. It sure seems…inert, she muses, as she clips the chain around her neck. But maybe that's a protective measure? Like those bugs that are camouflaged to look like sticks.

The bag is still weighed down by something, so Sakura reaches in for her final prize. Her fingers close around something…strange. She pulls it out to find—

Well. Suffice to say, any burgeoning crush on her sensei is summarily stamped out. Never let it be said that Hatake Kakashi couldn't disappoint a fair maiden with precisely zero words.

"Pakkun," Sakura growls, clutching the offending item in trembling hands. "Is this a *chew toy?!"*

Sakura does not, when later alone and safe from prying eyes in her bedroom, chew on the pink and white striped rubber bone.

She does *not.*

She does, however, sit down on her bed with Zabusa's gift in front of her on the duvet, regarding it curiously.

"So you're alive, huh?" She murmurs, kind of to herself. Not like the thing is going to reply.

Wait, if it's alive, that means—

“The chain!” She cries, picking up the small blue creature in her hands. Indeed, the chain from the necklace is attached by way of a metal eye that’s been *punched through the scale,* which…well, Sakura remembers getting her ears pierced. It sucked, and she did it because she wanted to. Not to mention the shell aspect! Sakura briefly envisions piercing a needle through her fingernail and shudders.

Who knows if something like this can feel pain, but…but it still seems wrong!

“Hold tight,” she instructs, before scrambling off of her bed to go find a pair of tweezers in the bathroom.

Removing the metal eye is tricky—the tweezers aren’t enough, and she ends up having to go find her dad to ask for a pair of pliers—but with a little bit of chakra and some finagling, it finally comes free.

She can briefly see a flash of some kind of wet, tan-looking tissue around the edges of the hole before it recedes under the hard blue outer layer. A brief whiff of briny water follows.

Sakura frowns, feeling guilty that she’d been ignorant to this for so long. Like…she wouldn’t wear a live bird or mouse around her neck; this little thing is no different just because it’s not quite as cute.

“I’m sorry, little guy,” she murmurs. “I’ll figure out some other way to keep you with me.”

It doesn’t respond (obviously) but after a long moment…something very odd happens.

From where it rests in her palm, two little eyestalks slowly peek out from under the widest edge of the scale. They stretch out to a final length of about a centimeter each, peering up at her with teeny, wet eyes.

“H-hi,” Sakura greets, awed and a little freaked out. It’s like…a snail! Or a clam! A…a snam!

Either way, clearly some kind of mollusc-like invertebrate. Sakura wonders then if Samehada is an aggregate life-form—do a great many of these small things work together as a colony? Or could this small organism grow into a giant sword-beast on its own, like a polyp from a jellyfish?

They regard each other for a moment, creature to creature.

“I’m Sakura,” she introduces herself, perhaps a little unnecessarily. “I’m sorry I treated you like a piece of jewelry; I didn’t know you were alive.”

One eyestalk sucks into itself before extending again. Sakura doesn’t speak snam but chooses to interpret that as a nod.

“Well…you’re free, I guess,” she offers. “I can take you outside if you want to go.”

The creature just continues to stare up at her.

Sakura frowns, considering. “Are you hungry?” she wonders. “I did take a lot of your chakra.”

With that thought, Sakura focuses some of her chakra into her palms. Maybe the snam can heal itself if she gives it a little boost.

Eyestalks wiggling, the snam happily gobbles up the proffered energy. Or Sakura assumes it does, because she can feel the chakra being depleted. Sure enough, after a few moments, the hole left by the metal eye begins to seal up. A layer of that tan tissue forms first, before the hard blue shell grows to cover it.

“So cool,” Sakura breathes, utterly fascinated. Now that she’s looking more closely, the blue shell doesn’t appear to be completely solid, and instead is composed of many tiny plates, presumably

connected by some kind of tough fibrous tissue that she can't see. The seams are almost imperceptible.

"Flexible armor, like chainmail," she muses aloud. Once again, the intersection of biology and chakra is a wonder to behold. What an amazing little creature!

The depletion of her chakra eventually slows, and the snam sucks down one eyestalk, then the other as if to say, *thanks for the meal!*

"You're welcome," Sakura nods in return. "Thank *you* for saving my life in that cave!"

They regard each other for another long moment. "So, ready to venture out into the world?" she offers with a grin. "Or would you like to stick with me?"

The offer is genuine, though she doubts the critter will take her up on it. Surely there are many places it would rather be than tagging along with some random kid!

But the snam doesn't make any indication that it would like to leave and instead just wiggles its little eyestalks at her again. Then it moves, startling Sakura so badly she flinches and almost drops it. But no matter, the snam has wrapped its surprisingly flexible body around her wrist like a bracelet.

The shell plates have layers, she realizes, allowing it to stretch and bend without exposing any of the soft inside tissue. Once settled, it merely resembles some kind of vaguely ocean-inspired bangle. The eyestalks are safely tucked away from whence they came.

Sakura giggles, delighted. "Well, alright then," she says, raising her wrist to eye-level. "Since we're going to be hanging out, can I give you a nickname?"

A single eyestalk emerges and wiggles at her.

Sakura hums. “Let’s see…well, Kakashi-sensei said you came from something called Samehada…but your eyestalks make me think of a snail, like little horns…or maybe a hammerhead? Shumokuzame?”

The eyestalk waves back and forth slowly as if to say, *eh…*

Sakura nods. “Okay, okay…well, you’re not a *full* shark and you are kind of parasitic in a way, no offense, so…how about…Shumoku-kobanzame?”

Hammerhead suckershark! It’s perfect!

The eyestalk wiggles more quickly this time, and Sakura takes it as agreement. “Alright, Shumoku-kobanzame it is. That’s a bit of a mouthful. How about Shu-chan for short?”

Vigorous wiggling. Sakura laughs in delight. “Well, alrighty then. It’s nice to meet you, Shu-chan!”

(Okay, she chews on the pink bone a little bit. But only a little bit!!!)

---

please welcome to the stage, Shumoku-kobanzame, AKA Shu-chan! i decided to put my own spin on what Samehada is/how it works, because it is not fleshed out at ALL in the series, which i take as encouragement to apply my own liberal artistic whims :) Shu-chan is a little inspired by Kensuke from Dungeon Meshi, and biologically kind of a mash-up of a bunch of different invertebrates. obviously i am heavily favoring mollusk features, but the ability to reproduce with polyps is more like coral/jellyfish, and being a colonial creature (so a bunch of zooids make one big "lifeform") is borrowed from my fav inverts, pyrosomes. ofc, those features are just sakura's conjecture, and might not reflect reality.....or do they.....WHO KNOWS.....

also, please give it up for kakashi, perhaps one of the few jounin in konoha who has been to therapy (gai made him go in my canon) and

internalized anything. to be clear, his explanation of the psychology of emotions vs logic is obviously pretty simplified, but mans is neither a neuroscientist or a shrink. he's working w what he's got lol

anyway, thanks for reading! as always, comments give me life and fuel my writing. next chapter will be in less time than this one took, since it's mostly finished.

next time: team 7 training goes turbo mode (for real this time) !

The sandbox

Chapter 18: The sandbox

---

hi everyone! thanks as always for so many kind comments. you're all the sweetest <3 i love how much everyone loves toothy, evermore dog-like sakura. pack feels ftw

and i love how much you all love Shu-chan!!! i really enjoyed reading everyone's theory's about Shu-chan and Sakura future encounters with Kisame. it's going to be a very fun element in the story, believe me!

AAAAAND short chapter today because guess what---for the first time in RRD history, **DOUBLE CHAPTER POST!**

this chapter is short and kind of slow WRT plot, so i want to keep the momentum going with a double post. the next chapter is way meatier.

enjoy! and huge thanks to my beta anxiousgrimalkin!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Two weeks later

“Ack, my shoe—Sakura, *look out!”*

And indeed, Sakura looks—just in time to be smacked in the face by Naruto’s sandal, which apparently slipped off of his foot and was swept up into the air by the hurricane-like winds currently battering her team.

She doesn’t even have time to be irritated, because another harsh blast of wind catches in her cloak like it's a sail, lifting her completely

off of the ground and tossing her ass over teacups a few feet away.

What on earth is going on with Team Seven? an onlooker might wonder.

Training.

Allegedly.

Two-ish weeks ago—which was two days after waking up with no cuspids—Sakura finally had enough teeth and enough control over her newly-perma-enhanced nose to return to team training.

She of course began by introducing everyone to Shu-chan, who alternates between being a bangle, a choker, an anklet, a festive ear-cuff, or hiding in one of Sakura's many, many pockets. After the initial shock and skepticism wears off, they all (even Sasuke) seem to find the odd little creature rather charming.

They also learn that Shu-chan can completely shield its chakra from detection, hence why neither Sasuke's sharingan nor Naruto's sensor abilities clocked it earlier. Sakura is, of course, fascinated by this and vows to look into it as soon as possible.

Or she would, if she had any energy to spare these days.

Because upon the day of her return, Kakashi-sensei quite cheerfully announced that they would be initiating a new phase of training called *Omnicompetence Training,* or *All-Terrain-All-Weather Readiness Drills.* One time he referred to it as "the sandbox" but then got all shifty-eyed and asked them not to repeat that phrase in front of any jounin, which was weird.

Either way, it apparently translates to Kakashi-sensei summoning all manner of catastrophic elemental techniques and hurling them at his team of defenseless genin while they attempt to spar, complete obstacle courses, and generally exist.

Major emphasis being on the word *attempt.*

It started off pretty simple, with a Water Release technique called Weeping Heavens that could be cast as a mere drizzle or dialed all of the way up to torrential downpour. It made for a treacherous running and blotted out sound in addition to reducing visibility. At first, the three of them spent a fair amount of time just trying to stay upright.

But chakra-adhesion helped deal with the slipperiness, and after a while, Sakura just became accustomed to her eyes and ears being full of water, calling upon chakra enhancement when she needed it. She adjusted to the added weight and clumsiness of her soaked haori (which was brought back from the dead by her mother's sewing skills). All in all, the training didn't seem too bad.

But then came the blistering heat. And the earthquakes. And the sandal-stealing mud, and the speaker playing a terrible screeching noise at eardrum-shattering levels, and the rotten bag of garbage that made Sakura's perma-enhanced nose go bonkers, and the three of them being fenced into a space barely big enough for two and being told to perform kata without touching, and then sparring barefoot on hot sand and pointy pebbles and now—

Wind. Well, a hurricane, really.

Apparently, the catalyst for this new regimen was the fight in Tsurui wherein Kakashi-sensei was poisoned. It went down in a terribly cramped space—literally the three-by-three foot genkan of Nobuko's friend's house—and the lack of room, combined with the surprise betrayal, caused Kakashi-sensei to fumble just for a millisecond. It was enough for the nuke-nin to graze him with a poisoned blade. The rest is history.

"Konoha shinobi are sometimes referred to by other nations as 'fairweather fighters,'" Kakashi-sensei explained after one particularly grueling obstacle course that was also *on fire* the whole time. "And frankly, they're spot on. We live in a temperate climate, food is not

scarce, and our village is at peace with our neighbors. We learn to fight under the *best* of conditions, which ultimately does not serve us in the long term."

The genin of Team Seven had nodded rapturously as he spoke.

"Many other nations have a much harsher climate or more extreme geography, and their shinobi are raised not only to survive but use it to their advantage. Things like terrain and temperature—or even just novel stimuli, like noise or smell—can even the playing field and make someone otherwise quite powerful very easy to kill," he said.

At some point, Naruto brought out his little haggard notebook and began scribbling away. Sakura could relate—the onslaught of information was mind-boggling. *Why was this not taught in the academy?! It seems so important!*

"Relatedly, alteration of weather patterns or terrain is a pretty inherent aspect of elemental ninjutsu, *"* Kakashi-sensei continued. "In addition to the acute attack, it serves as another way of disrupting your focus or causing damage. By going through this training—and maintaining it in the future—you three will be prepared to fight anywhere, at any time."

Then he gave them all a pat on the head. "And I refuse to lose any of you again due to something as stupid as circumstances."

At the time, Sakura's heart had fluttered. *So gallant!*

Presently, Kakashi-sensei yells over the wind. "Sakura, remember what I told you about chakra-adhesion and your cloak!"

Ah crap, he's right, Sakura grouses internally, spitting out some dirt. Before another gust can come her way, Sakura coats her back and thighs with sticky chakra to keep her cloak close to her body, preventing a repeat performance as the mainsail on a fishing boat.

Training in the appropriate gear is also part of the deal, Sakura has learned. At first, she'd been as skeptical as Naruto when sensei *insisted* they bring their cold-weather cloaks for training. Then he made her try a back-handspring while wearing it; she ended up in a tangled heap after it smacked her in the face and got wrapped around her hands mid-air. Okay, point taken.

The brutal training is ameliorated somewhat by the fact that Kakashi-sensei starts to regularly spring for dinner and, much more importantly, begins his own rigorous regimen alongside them. More often than not, this sees their teacher equally exhausted at the end of day, as he goes through workouts crazy enough to make Gai-sensei sweat.

Speaking of Gai-sensei, the bushy-browed teacher can apparently smell suffering from miles away, because a week or so ago, he showed up for a serving of the brutal training—and to spar with Kakashi-sensei—bringing his genin team with him. And then kept showing up routinely.

Naturally, Sakura was delighted for new opportunities to see her Eternal Rival in action and compete against him. It also meant she got to witness his first meeting with Naruto and Sasuke, which was suitably entertaining. After some initial skepticism from Naruto, he and Lee ended up bonding over their insane work ethics and generally sunny dispositions. Sakura's earnest idiots. Oh, how she cherishes them so.

Gai-sensei is also apparently the person Kakashi-sensei had been referring to when he told doctor Mariko that he had a physical therapist lined up for her. Admittedly, Sakura had been skeptical initially…but her doubts were misplaced. Gai-sensei is incredibly well-educated in kinesiology and physical therapy, and after a few sessions with him, she's gotten her leg-stretches down to less than ten minutes. It raises her spirits immeasurably to be able to run and leap and kick with minimal issues.

As for the rest of Team Gai, Sakura's feelings are a little mixed.

Hyūga Neji is…kind of like a discount Sasuke, in Sakura's opinion. All of the brooding and sanctimoniousness but none of the mystique. Even after Naruto and Sasuke managed to kick his butt during a few spars, he remained stubbornly dismissive of her team—and of Sakura in particular. It wasn't until Sakura used a flicker to deliver a haymaker that knocked the boy flat on his ass that he chills out.

Why is it always punching that gets them to respect me? She had wondered at the time, a little sourly.

Tenten, on the other hand, is *awesome.* She's mature and strong and funny and absolutely spanked Sakura using this sick pair of curved swords that she called *tiger-head hooks* during their first spar, before helping Sakura up and complimenting her speed. So *cool.* Sakura is both deeply envious of her skills and totally enamored with her in general. Tenten's shoulders are just so lithe and muscular too, and she smells good, and moves with the same kind of athletic confidence that Sasuke does.

So, if Sakura blushes a little every time Tenten looks her way, that's her business, alright?!

This day, as they break for lunch, Naruto poses a question that's been on Sakura's mind.

"Hey sensei, why are *you* training so much too?" Naruto asks, digging into his bento. One that he made! It's simple, just rice balls and some pickled veggies on the side, but Sakura is so proud!

"Hm?" Kakashi-sensei responds a little absently as he flops down to lean against a tree. He's sweaty and breathing heavily from a spar with Gai-sensei, apparently having removed his jacket and sweatshirt at some point.

Sakura focuses on her own lunch—leftover okonomiyaki—and tries not to stare at his arms. Most of the attentiveness is envy—why can't *hers* look like that?—and some of it is…not. His scent makes her

nose tingle. Why is she cursed with such cool comrades? And with such a fickle heart?!? *Sasuke, I apologize for my flightiness!*

Sakura can't help it, she's always been quick to crush on people, and her new nose only seems to make things worse. People who smell neutral or even kinda bad are just eh, but people who smell good … gods, do they smell *good.* And there are different types of good, like her family smells good but not in an exciting way. Naruto smells nice, but it doesn't make her heart go *thumpa-thump.*

Now, Sasuke and Tenten on the other hand…

Gah! Focus on the okonomiyaki!

Regardless, it adds an entirely new dimension of attractiveness to people. It's terribly distracting.

And not to mention the sudden and all-encompassing desire to *bite.*

It's so bad. It's *so* bad. Sakura wants to bite everyone, all of the time. She wants to nip at Sasuke's slender fingers when he signs and she wants to chew on Naruto's cute little whiskered cheeks when he grins his big sunny grin. Kakashi-sensei's masked chin is a siren-song; it would be so satisfying to gnaw on, she just *knows* it. If irritated, she wants to flash her fangs and deliver a warning bite to the annoying party. A bout of giggles is accompanied by the overwhelming impulse to *chomp.*

Angry? Bite.

Sad? Bite.

Happy? You better believe it: *bite.*

But Sakura can't exactly do any of that without getting shipped off to the loony-bin, probably, so she just seethes silently all day and then goes home and chews on that stupid freaking pink rubber bone.

And for now, she sinks her teeth into a chunk of beef and tries not to pretend it's one of her teammates' arms.

"All this training," Naruto waves a rice ball in their teacher's vague direction. "I dunno, you were pretty lazy before. You'd just kinda sit and read while we weeded gardens n' stuff."

Gai-sensei gives Kakashi-sensei a wounded look from where he sits next to the man. "Surely that's not true! Do you not engage in the springtime of youth with your youthly compatriots?"

Kakashi-sensei just shrugs. "Eh, I got a little complacent," he says lightly, though to Sakura's keen eye there's some genuine self-deprecation in there. Then he says to Naruto, "This level is closer to what my typical regimen was like before I became your teacher."

Naruto nods, accepting that answer. "I like it when we all train together," the blond says. "Like it sucks, because it's hard, but it's fun too!"

Sakura nods resolutely in agreement, and is pleased to see Sasuke's head incline too. He's very right!

Training to be able to fight in any weather or terrain…it might seem basic, but in Sakura's opinion, it might be the most useful thing she's ever learned. Big, fancy techniques are impressive and powerful, but being able to adapt is the *ultimate* tool.

It'll be nice to feel like she's on solid ground, wherever she goes. At least on the battlefield, anyway. Speaking of that…hmm. There has been something bugging her for a bit, but she's going to save it for when it's just her team.

Post-lunch training is more wind techniques to knock them upside down and sideways. Sakura's team is getting the hang of keeping upright with chakra, and Neji somehow manages to both never fall over *and* maintain perfectly silky hair through the ordeal. Tenten figures out a cool method for tethering herself using ninja wires and

kunai, which Lee ends up adopting as well since he can't mold chakra properly.

It's a strange affliction, she muses, to have approximately zero chakra control. He obviously *has* chakra—he'd be dead if he didn't—presumably mostly Yang type from his physical exploits. Does the imbalance contribute to the control issues?

Unfortunately, such musings are occurring during a spar with Neji, and he is the kind to take full advantage of any distraction. Both of Sakura's upper legs get walloped with Gentle Palm and she goes down like a puppet with its strings cut. Naruto is charitable enough to drag her off of the field while Sasuke takes his turn against Tenten.

"Aw, man," Sakura grouses, now propped up against a tree. She tries and fails a few times to get them to even twitch, and her useless legs almost seem to mock her. "How am I supposed to get myself home?"

(internally, she's trying to ignore the fact that this reminds her *so much* of the freaking cave.)

"I'll take you, Sakura-chan!" Naruto offers with a sunny smile, and Sakura returns the grin, although a little shakier.

"Thanks, cousin!" Sakura chirps, and offers him her fist for their secret handshake. She's about to follow that up with another comment when the conversation between Gai and Kakashi-sensei makes her pause.

"So, will you be entering your youthful students into the chūnin exams, my friend?"

Kakashi-sensei sighs, and then sighs again when he realizes that all attention has suddenly turned to him.

"I've thought about it," he admits. "Although, I doubt I really have a choice. I'm sure the council wants a public showing of the Uchiha

bloodline."

A cold claw of fear trails up Sakura's spine. "Do you think we're ready for that?" She interjects, her usual reticence to butt into an adult conversation fully blotted out by anxiety. They've been genin for like all of five minutes! And a lot of it has been spent running for their freaking lives because of getting in over their heads!

Sensei's gaze moves to her. "Yes and no," he answers. "Combat abilities-wise, I think you three could pass as chūnin. But experience-wise…it's harder to say. I do think you would benefit from a few more missions under your belt beyond menial labor and two accidental A-ranks."

Speaking of A-ranks…Team Seven finally got their paychecks for the Tetsugawa mission a few days ago, and…wow. Apparently when nobility is involved, the paperwork multiplies by orders of magnitude, but the wait was worth it because Sakura doesn't think she's seen that many zeros in her *life.* The pay had been bonkers *before* it became a rescue mission, and Sakura also got the bounty of two chūnin-ranked nuke-nin on top.

Sakura used it to completely restock her weapons supply and put the rest in a savings account, feeling a decent bit more secure about her future. She can probably buy a nice kimono for Nobuko's wedding, too!

But back on the subject at hand…

"It would be a pretty good learning opportunity," Kakashi-sensei continues. "I was thinking you three could participate but more as an information- and experience-gathering mission, rather than with the explicit intention to seek promotion. How does that sound?"

Sakura nods, relief making her shoulders droop. That sounds way more reasonable.

"Works for me!" Naruto agrees cheerfully.

Sakura blinks, surprised by his easy acceptance. “I figured you’d be full steam ahead, *promote me yesterday* about it,” she tells him.

The blond boy’s expression becomes thoughtful as he says, “Well, every time we’ve rushed into stuff, it’s gone like *majorly* sideways. Probably oughta be smart about this.”

A proud grin finds its way onto Sakura’s face. “That’s very mature of you, Naruto,” she compliments. “I agree.”

The conversation lulls, and Sakura turns her attention to her useless legs. “Gentle Palm, huh?” she mutters, mostly to herself. “Hmm.”

“Do you have opinions on my clan’s ancestral taijutsu style, Haruno-san?”

Sakura blinks in surprise; she hadn’t realized that the Hyūga had come to sit with her and the others beneath the tree.

“Neji-san,” she greets, mostly out of reflex. “Ah, no, um. I was just thinking about how I really don’t know anything about chakra.”

Naruto makes a confused noise. “What d’you mean, Sakura-chan! You know the most outta like…anybody!”

Sakura hums, crossing her arms in thought. “I mean, that is categorically false, but thank you. I just…hm. That technique vexes me.” Her eyes narrow. “I am *vexed.”*

“How does it vex you so, Haruno-san?” Neji asks dryly, apparently in a good enough mood to humor her. Rare indeed.

“I remember back in the Academy we had a unit on the ancient clans, and we learned a little about the Hyūga techniques,” she begins, pulling *Kuzushi no ri* out of the breast pocket of her haori to run her thumb along the paper edges rhythmically. Her new fidgeting habit, as it were.

“All nonsense fluff, of course, so as not to draw the anger of the clan head, but they did give some basic descriptions. Specifically, that your bloodline allows you to see tenketsu and that your taijutsu targets them to do *this.”* She gestures at her paralyzed legs.

Neji doesn’t say anything, but his eyes narrow a tiny bit.

“But *how?”* she wonders. “Even if tenketsu are small and hard to aim for specifically, if all it takes is physical damage to block them, then by chance alone it should happen all of the time in battles. But I've certainly never heard of such a thing! So there’s gotta be more to it. My guess is that you use chakra somehow, either to amplify damage or reconstruct it to be more damaging to chakra coils.”

Distantly, Sakura can hear Naruto say, “Ooh, Sakura’s going on one of her super-brainstorms! Everybody listen up, she’s about to drop some genius stuff!”

“This got me thinking about tenketsu in general, and I don’t exactly know how they work—none of the books I’ve read on anatomy and chakra theory are of a high enough level to go into deep specifics—but I have some ideas. So, first things first, chakra perfuses living tissue as it circulates to vitalize it, right?” Sakura asks her audience, a little rhetorically.

She gets a few hesitant nods in return, which is good enough for her.

“Different parts of your body need different amounts of chakra depending on physical demands, and tenketsu can open and close to let more through. Chakra can only flow in *one* direction through them, but the central coil system is interconnected, meaning chakra has a few routes back to the heart center. But if you keep moving it through the lines that branch away, eventually it will pass the last tenketsu and can do nothing but perfuse surrounding tissue, and then the excess radiates off.”

Sakura stuffs *Kuzushi no ri* back into her pocket so she can start fiddling with the plates on her armguards, still very deep in thought.

“Most of the tenketsu in our body automatically open and close as needed so chakra can flow. We use the phrase *opening tenketsu,* to describe controlling our chakra sometimes, but it’s kind of a misnomer. Humans can’t *consciously* control tenketsu—in the same way you can’t *consciously* control the nephrons in your kidneys, they just react based on how much water is in your system. Essentially… chakra homeostasis.”

At this point, Sasuke and Tenten have returned from their spar, Sasuke victorious. Sakura is so focused on her brainstorming that she barely notices, which is saying something.

“When people can and *do* move chakra though their body, the chakra flows along the coils as directed by the central nervous system,” Sakura mutters, recalling the chakra-anatomy textbook she read. “The tenketsu aren’t being controlled directly, they open and close as a byproduct.”

Well, hm. Actually, that’s not quite right, she muses.

“Or, byproduct isn’t quite the right word, but it's a necessary part of moving chakra. My theory is that they’re kind of like the one-way valves of our venous system.”

Sakura glances up to gauge her audience. Everyone looks at least moderately interested, but Naruto looks utterly lost. To demonstrate the idea, Sakura steeples her fingers together and then instructs him to push his own hand up through her touching fingers, approaching from the bottom.

“If they’re like tricuspid valves, then chakra can push them open and move unidirectionally,” she explains as his hand comes up to separate her touching fingertips.

“Naruto, now try to push down from coming from above,” she tells the boy. He does so, and under the pressure of his hand, her fingers bend just slightly before they brace against each other and hold strong.

“I think If chakra tries to go the other direction, the force of it actually *closes* the tenketsu,” she says, before letting her hands drop into her lap. “Or maybe it’s a pressure thing? Either way, in addition to that, the presence of a certain amount of chakra on the exit side must *also* prevent more from coming through. It’s an adaptation to prevent the unnecessary loss of chakra that would radiate off constantly if the flow was unchecked. Though I imagine that as someone trains and uses more chakra, their chakra coil system grows to accommodate such needs.”

Neji opts to interrupt her (admittedly a little meandering) train of thought. “How does this relate to Gentle Palm?”

She gives him a look. “I’m getting there. Okay, so, how *do* you open something you can’t control, and that opens and closes in response to a certain environment? Well, you need to *induce* the scenario in which case it would open naturally. We can’t control tenketsu, but we *can* control chakra flow between tenketsu. Meaning, you can increase outwards flow—causing radiating loss—and thus catalyzing the induction of more chakra to the distal coils. That’s how I think most people are able to tree-walk; a constant expulsion of a small out of chakra through the feet induces flow, which reacts to the natural energy and so forth. Maybe because being able to run fast and climb has been advantageous for forever, evolution has selected for easier-to-control flow in our extremities.”

Neji is glaring, but he seems more unnerved than bored. “I still don’t see how—”

“I’m *getting* there!” Sakura grumps. So rude!

“Anyway, if chakra flow is mitigated by concentration-sensitive valves—the tenketsu—then maybe delivering a bolus of hyper-concentrated chakra is how you shut them off for an extended period of time.”

Neji goes absolutely stock still, which makes Sakura grin. *Shannaro, I must be right!*

“It’s basic molecular biology,” she forges on, ignorant to the growing expression of discomfort on her sensei’s face. “Biomolecules often act as their own down-regulators; a high abundance triggers a signal cascade that causes a decrease of their production or an increase in their degradation, or both. So…my hypothesis is that Gentle Palm works by artificially overloading specific tenketsu. The worse the overload, the longer it takes for them to recover.”

Neji is staring at her with huge eyes. It’s the most emoting she’s seen out of the boy yet.

“Which *means,”* Sakura says, building momentum now. “If you could mimic the state that causes flow with whatever dregs of chakra you have left in those coils, then…“

Sakura closes her eyes, focusing on the pathways in her left leg. Everything feels numb and tingly from her upstream tenketsu being blocked, but she’s gotten pretty familiar with these coils over the past few weeks. *Never thought I’d be grateful for having to do PT,* she thinks wryly. With her face scrunched in absolute concentration, Sakura grunts and—

Her leg twitches.

“Dang it,” Sakura grumbles. She’d been hoping for something a bit more impressive than that.

However, Neji’s expression has gone from moderately perturbed to fully alarmed, and he begins to stand. “Pardon me, I need to—”

“Not so fast,” Kakashi-sensei’s hand flashes out and clamps around Neji’s wrist like a vice.

Then sensei stands, dragging the boy with him.

“We’re just going to have a quick little chat, Neji and I,” her teacher says, and then absconds with the Hyūga into the surrounding

shrubbery. Gai-sensei immediately follows, and then there are a few long seconds of awkward silence.

“Rival, your wisdom shines brighter than a supernova!” Lee says, tears gathered in his eyes. “It is moving to witness such a feat of intellectual prowess!”

Sakura giggles, a little embarrassed by the praise, but pleased as well. But also…why did sensei drag Neji off into the bushes?!

Speaking of Neji, god, what Sakura would give to be able to see through Byakugan eyes for just a moment. To be able to *see* chakra and tenketsu…she could learn so much! Maybe she could even figure out what it is about Lee’s biology that makes chakra so difficult to mold for him.

Actually…she’s got a question for Neji when he and their teachers return. But for now, she’ll grill Lee.

“Lee, when you say you can’t mold chakra, can you be more specific?” Sakura asks, in lieu of freaking out about her teacher dragging a peer off into the woods for god knows why.

The boy thinks for a moment. “If I had to choose a metaphor, I would describe it as trying to fold a big blanket into a delicate origami crane, using chopsticks instead of my hands.”

Sakura blinks, a little mystified by the wording, but Naruto makes a noise of understanding. “Ohh, so it’s like…super slow and every time you think you’re making progress, you realize you messed up everything you’d finished up til then! Right?”

Lee’s face lights up. “Precisely so, Naruto-kun!”

Sakura nods. That makes a little more sense. “I wonder…Lee, have you heard of the mind-muscle connection?” she asks.

He salutes. “Certainly! Having exquisite control over very specific muscle groups is key to my speed and taijutsu. I would risk severe injury if I did not train it.”

Sakura nods again. “I figured as much,” she murmurs, pulling out *Kuzushi no ri* to start her fidgeting circuit all over again. Sakura isn’t *super* familiar with the concept, but that book on work-outs—yes, the female, low muscle to body mass ratio one—had mentioned it a few times.

Running her thumb over the pages, Sakura muses, “Taijutsu uses chakra indirectly, because muscle tissue and tendons and whatnot need vitalization as they work…so, I wonder…hmm…”

Sakura has a hypothesis, but she’ll need Neji’s help to test it, and he’s still—

“We have returned, students mine and not mine!” Gai-sensei’s booming voice cuts her thoughts short, and she turns to see the lycra-clad man come popping out of the shrubbery. Neji is next, followed by Kakashi-sensei.

Neji’s face is a little pale, but he otherwise appears unruffled. Also, he’s just pretty pale in general, so maybe Sakura is presuming extraneous paleness. It’s hard to say.

“Hey, Neji,” she chirps a little solicitously as he lowers himself into a neat seiza.

He looks at her askance.

“Would you do me a favor and use your Byakugan to look at Lee for a moment?”

He raises a brow at her, and the silent *why would I do that?* is somehow quite loud anyway.

Sakura aims her most winning smile at him. “Please? I have an idea, and it could help Lee, y’know, your *teammate.”*

Neji watches her for another moment, an inscrutable expression on his face. His gaze flickers over to Lee and then Gai-sensei, before he lets out a little annoyed huff, his eyes falling shut. “Very well.”

When they reopen, veins bulge around his temples.

Sakura lets out a little yip of glee, clapping her hands excitedly. “Yay, thank you! Okay, Lee, make a fist and squeeze really hard.”

“Okay!” He does so.

Sakura nods. “Good, now make a fist, but only lightly.”

“Okay!”

“Great! Okay, now gimme your hand,” she says, and takes the offered hand in her own. She gently curls his fingers into a fist and holds them there for a few moments before relinquishing the appendage back to its owner.

Then she turns to Neji, all but squirming with excitement. “So, the amount of chakra that automatically perfused his arm changed depending on the amount of physical effort, right?”

“That statement is accurate.”

“And the amount, therefore, that radiated off was also more, correct?”

“Correct.”

Sakura whips around to face Lee, and snatches up his hands in her own again. “Lee,” she says, trying not to let her voice tremble. “What if you figured out a way to use your *muscles* to induce the same kind of flow required for adhesion? With your level of taijutsu and Neji’s help, I bet you could do it!”

His eyes grow huge, and he turns to the two jounin present. “Gai-sensei, do you think that’s…possible?”

The so-named jounin looks thoughtful. “I don’t see why not.”

Kakashi-sensei then chimes in, “It’s a bit of a brute force approach, but as long as he’s radiating enough off to blend with the natural energy…I think it ought to work.”

Lee’s eyes well up with tears, and he clutches Sakura’s hands back tightly when he turns back to her. “Sakura-san, you have my deepest gratitude for applying your intellect so generously! I shall commence training *immediately!”*

The bushy-browed boy leaps up before extending a hand to Neji.

“I beseech you, my comrade,” Lee says. “Look closely at my feet!”

Later, when Team Gai has taken their leave and Team Seven is about to split up for the evening, Sakura finally has a chance to voice her suggestion. It goes over about as well as she expected, which is to say, like a lead balloon.

“Etiquette training?”

Sakura nods resolutely, trying not to allow the dubious expressions on her teammates’ faces dampen her spirits. To his credit, Kakashi-sensei looks curious rather than disdainful.

“Yes, etiquette training,” she says. “Look, we’ve decided that as a team we’re going to change Konoha, right?”

She gets three mute nods in return.

“Then we need to start networking. We need the people in power to like us enough that they won’t try to stand in our way on principle. Better yet, we need them to like us enough that they actively support our movements.”

Naruto doesn’t seem convinced. “But Sakura-chan, if I’m Hokage then—”

“Then you could be unseated any time by the council or the daimyo if they so choose,” she cuts him off. “The Hokage is the face of the village and the military leader, but at the end of the day, the daimyo is the most powerful man in the Land Of Fire. Unless we’re at war, he calls the shots.”

Then she thinks for a moment. “For now, anyway.”

She can hear Kakashi-sensei grumble, *"Hoo boy*,” under his breath in response to that.

Sakura glares at him briefly. “Anyway, the reality is that if we want to change this place, we can’t just bust into the political scene in ten years and start throwing our weight around. It’ll get us nowhere fast,” she explains, arms akimbo. “If we start rubbing elbows with the right people *now,* we’ll have a much better chance at accomplishing anything.”

“But what does that have to do with etiquette training?” Naruto asks.

Sasuke is the one to answer him. “My father would complain about the elders and nobles after clan-head meetings sometimes,” he says. “They’re obsessed with manners and all that court stuff.”

Sakura nods. “Yup. Being able to recite classic poetry, wearing the right clothes, remembering the name of the daimyo’s cousin’s brother’s dog’s uncle’s kid…it’s not just helpful, it’s *required*, especially if you don’t have a bloodline to back you up. If you don’t play by those rules, you get the boot.”

Naruto makes a noise of understanding. “Oh, I think I get it now! So…we gotta go be all fancy-like and get cozy with the daimyo’s buddies so they think we’re cool and jive with them so when we totally take over they won’t resist until it’s too late…right?”

Sakura grins, fangs flashing in the evening sun. “*Exactly*.”

---

sakura's brain is just too big for most people to handle. sorry neji! to that end---i know it's unkind of her to refer to him as discount sasuke, but keep in mind sakura has ZERO idea of his absolutely horrific backstory. all she knows is that he's a jerk sometimes. which is not an excuse! she's just (currently) ignorant.

i won't even bother with "next time" cuz it's already here! ONWARDS!

Second impressions (can be just as important)

Chapter 19: Second impressions (can be just as important)

WHOOOO PART 2 OF THE DOUBLE CHAPTER POST EVENT!

this chapter has a loooot more plot (like, i finally start to introduce elements from the major, underlying plot for the whole fic), and the beginning of a mini-arc within the Royal Wedding arc. it's gonna be a lot of fun!

big thanks as always to anxiousgrimalkin, my fastidious beta :)

please enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Etiquette training is…not going well.

Part of the problem is that Sakura herself has no idea what she's doing. Reading old romance novels about fanciful courtiers and their suitors apparently does not prepare one for actually engaging with the upper crust.

The library is moderately helpful—she picks up a few books on etiquette and manners and is abruptly reminded that she's allowed to read chunin-level stuff now, how did she forget oh my *god* —but rote memorization is Sakura's forte, not Naruto's, and even the sharingan is apparently not helpful for trying to engage in polite conversation, who knew?

So, after a few afternoons spent trying to correct Sasuke's posture and quizzing Naruto on the names of the members of the Yoshida

family, all while trying to coach their language to be more polite… Sakura is at her absolute wits end. Sasuke can't string more than a few sentences together before becoming monosyllabic, and Naruto keeps mixing up the Daimyo's cousins with his second or third cousins, though she can't really fault them for either of these transgressions. It's a lot to take in with just mere weeks left to make the improvements.

All of them together, they actually create a pretty formidable team: Sasuke can fill in the patchy bits of Naruto's memory, and the blond's sunny demeanor and generally compelling affect could probably swindle the mustache off of even the stuffiest courtier—presuming he gets enough of a handle on his potty mouth. But Sakura isn't naive enough to think they'll never end up separated, and either boy alone for five minutes is enough to send her council-schmoozing schemes up in smoke.

So, rubbing elbows with the rich and powerful to get their support just might not be part of Team Seven's plan for a future revolution. How hard can a violent coup really be?

Thankfully, sandbox training is going well enough. They're really starting to get the hang of adapting team formations to the environment.

Or…it *was* going well enough. Now, Sakura isn't so sure.

Kakashi-sensei, for all of his one thousand techniques or whatever, is still limited by certain restrictions. For example, Ice Release, like what Haku is capable of, is a form of combined Water and Wind release and is bloodline dependent. Thus, he is incapable.

(Secretly, Sakura is starting to think the exclusivity stuff is all hooey, but that's an argument for another day.)

Regardless, it means that in order to thrash his team with ice and snow and all other manner of cold torture, he has to bring in someone else to do it. That person is Uzuki Yuugao, his former

teammate, and apparently one of the few people in Konoha capable of Ice Release.

She is also apparently one of the people in Konoha who hates Sakura.

Or at least it kind of *feels* that way. Ever since Yugao-sensei was introduced to them yesterday, she's been extremely curt with Sakura. Every word said to her is bitten off and her glare seems to dog Sakura's every step. Conversely, the woman treats the boys with a polite, if somewhat aloof, decency.

Could it be some weird internalized misogyny? Sakura wondered initially. There's also something oddly familiar about the woman, but Sakura can't place it. The purple hair and brown eyes, though…it's ringing a bell somewhere.

Sakura says nothing about this discrepancy in treatment, of course. It's just subtle enough that maybe she's imagining it…? Or maybe not, because after one relatively loud disdainful scoff in Sakura's direction, Sasuke caught her eye to sign *'what gives?'*

Sakura shrugs in response, totally baffled. Kakashi-sensei hasn't said anything about it either, so maybe this is how Yugao-sensei always behaves with other female teammates. That's easier to swallow than him ignoring it all entirely, anyway.

Day two of training with Yugao-sensei is where it finally goes off of the rails.

The purple-haired jounin's team apparently had a rather involved D-rank they were doing yesterday and completed this morning, finally allowing them to join their sensei and meet Team Seven. Or re-meet, anyway. Sakura is pretty freaking acquainted with one of them. Because it's—

"Ami," Sakura says flatly, so entirely caught off guard by the arrival of her old bully that she forgets to have a reaction at all.

“Hey, Haruno,” the older girl greets stiltedly. There’s no derision in her face or voice, just mild trepidation and a *big* heaping of awkwardness. The lack of hostility is so surprising that Sakura can’t do anything but stare with her mouth open.

Ami has changed a *lot.* Gone are the bright striped dresses and the perma-sneer; instead she’s sporting a dark cropped shirt, gray shorts, some mesh armor and sandals with shin-guards, and a wary expression. Her minions are gone as well, replaced by two young boys—a Hyūga and an Akimichi from the looks of it.

Sakura wants to say something—anything—but before she can, Yugao-sensei puts her body between Sakura and Ami, almost… defensively? Why on earth would Ami need defending from *Sakura?* It should be the other way around!

…or perhaps not, anymore. Anger and insecurity used to ooze from Ami’s every pore. Now, she seems pretty mellow. There’s a looseness to her body that speaks to some level of self–confidence.

“Let’s get back to training,” Yugao-sensei says. “Pinky, you’re up.”

Sakura jerks to attention. “Yes, Yugao-sensei!” She begins trotting over to the obstacle course, vowing to put Ami out of her mind right now. She needs to focus.

Kakashi-sensei calls out after her, “Ice-Field and Arctic Winds this time, Sakura!”

The genin gives him a salute. Thankfully, Kakashi-sensei had Yugao-sensei slowly increasing the level of difficulty and danger of the techniques thrown at them. Ice is so infrequently encountered in a warm climate like Fire country that it’s especially difficult to acclimate to. The slippery surface, the risk of frostbite, the fact that it can become a spear or a bludgeon or melt into water that drowns…it’s a fearsome element, indeed.

Ice-Field and Arctic Winds means that Sakura will need to use her chakra to add traction to her sandals, keep her cloak reasonably close, and also circulate it to keep her core warm. She summons the necessary chakra and sets off on the course, assuming Yugao-sensei will use the techniques when she deems it appropriate.

And boy, does she.

Sakura hasn't put more than one foot after the other before the entire course is coated in a thick layer of ice, and immediately followed by winds so cold they rob her of breath. It's not just the kind of cold that makes you shiver, but the kind that *bites,* that instantly steals into your bones and sucks away any warmth you've ever had. The kind that sets off some sort of primal warning bell in Sakura's brain that says *if you don't get out of this soon, you will die.*

Steeling herself, Sakura forges on. It's pretty difficult, but her chakra control isn't considered genius for nothing. She makes it past the spike pit and is about to engage with the spinning wooden dummies when something—call it animal instincts—makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. With barely a hair's breadth to spare, Sakura dodges the spear of solid ice that suddenly explodes out of one of the dummies.

Oh shi —

Suddenly, it's the cave all over again, only this time instead of spears of basalt it's ice, bursting out of the ground, the dummies, wherever Sakura thinks to escape to. They erupt from each surface with eerie, crackling shrieks as water vapor and air are suddenly and cataclysmically forced to crystalize. Relentlessly they chase Sakura, one after another, caging her into a brilliantly sparkling world of deathly cold.

I have to get out of here! In a panic, Sakura floods her body with chakra and launches herself up and away from the grasping claws of ice. Later, she'll realize how stupid that was because she could have

impaled herself on one, but for now, all she can think about is getting away.

The leap is enough to clear the rest of the course, and she stumbles down onto her knees just past the finish line. Technically, it's a failed run—the point is to engage with the obstacles, not skip over them.

The sensation of something pinching Sakura's wrist brings her out of her shocked stupor—it's Shu-chan, grounding her with the sting. Sakura blinks into awareness just in time for Yugao-sensei to step into her line of sight.

"S-sorry," she pants, wilting under the woman's derisive stare. "I thought it was just going to be Ice-Field and–"

"Do you think your enemies will tell you ahead of time what techniques they'll be using?" Yugao-sensei snaps, cutting her off.

Sakura flinches away from the woman, cowed, and then again when she begins to draw the blade at her hip. *Is…is she going to hurt me?*

"I-I'm sorry—"

Yugao-sensei only manages one step with her katana half-drawn before Kakashi-sensei appears, his hand closing around her wrist like a vice.

"What's gotten into you?" he demands.

Yugao-sensei tries to yank her hand free but his grip is like iron, immovable. "Fuck off, Kakashi."

He doesn't waver. "You have been rude, dismissive, and now outright violent towards my student. Why?"

Yugao-sensei's lips curl into a sneer and she growls, "I don't answer to you."

But Kakashi-sensei's grip must tighten to the point of pain because she grimaces, and he steps closer, towering over the woman. "I think you'll find that you do, kohai."

She holds his gaze for a moment before her face contorts into true rage. "That brat is the kid who tormented Ami, my cousin, for *years,* Kakashi!" she snarls. "She locked Ami in a closet until she pissed herself!"

Sakura's jaw drops. The shock of the accusation is so great that she forgets to consider if she actually wants the current audience to hear the next words out of her mouth: *"What?* She's the one who did that to *me!"*

Silence.

Yugao-sensei freezes before she whips around to look at Ami. The younger purple-haired girl, who until now had been hovering nearby, is wearing a crumpled expression of intense shame.

Yugao-sensei's fury rapidly wilts into uncertainty. "That can't be true, right? Ami…?"

Ami glances at Yugao-sensei, her cousin, apparently—the similar hair and eyes make more sense now. Her cheeks are bright red and her eyes well with tears before she takes off for the woods like a shot.

"Ami—!" Yugao-sensei tries to go after her, but Kakashi-sensei still hasn't released her wrist.

"You don't get to threaten my student and then just run off," he says. "The girl will be fine. I can track her later."

The two teachers have an intense moment of eye-contact before Yugao-sensei slumps, evidently defeated. Then she turns to Sakura, shame writ large across her face.

“What about the centipede in her lunchbox?” the woman asks, a little desperate now, and Sakura sighs.

“It was a slug, and she put it in my thermos.”

“And when you flushed her bracelet down the toilet…?”

Sakura is the one to grimace this time. “It was a gift from my late grandmother,” she says. “Thankfully, Shino’s bugs were able to find it and bring it back to me.”

“What about—”

But Kakashi-sensei cuts her off. “I think it’s safe to say any accusation was an admission, at this point,” he says firmly.

Sakura flushes, suddenly aware of the fact that everyone’s attention is on her. It’s bad enough that these total strangers are getting a first hand account of her childhood humiliation, but the fact that Sasuke is witnessing it too? *Kill me now,* she despairs.

Sakura sighs and finally summons enough energy to push back up to her feet. “Ami was…pretty terrible to me for a while, basically until our classes got split up after second year,” she admits. “It’s weird because when we first met…we actually got along pretty well. Like friends, even. Then she came over to my house once and everything changed.”

Yugao-sensei’s attention sharpens like that might mean something, so Sakura keeps talking.

She kicks at a pebble and mutters, “Like she met my parents and they were nice to her because my parents are awesome and we had dinner, and everything seemed fine, and then the next day…it was like a switch had been flipped.”

“...Ah.”

Sakura looks up sharply at Yugao-sensei's noise of realization. "Ah? Ah what?"

Yugao-sensei sighs and rubs at her wrist, having just received custody back from Sakura's teacher. "Ami's parents…well, let's just say my aunt and uncle leave a lot to be desired as *people,* let alone parents," she explains, making Sakura's stomach plummet. "My mom ended up taking her in, which is why she's like a little sister to me."

Sakura blinks. "So, she decided to torment me because my parents were nice and she was…jealous?" she hazards.

Yugao-sensei's expression becomes pinched. "Probably something like that."

Sakura digests the information "That's…" *Awful? Unfair?*

"...Really sad," she decides.

After pondering it for a moment, Sakura comes to a decision. "I'm going after her," she decides, and without waiting for approval, flickers off in the direction Ami had gone.

Sakura's enhanced nose and speed allow her to track and catch up to the girl fairly quickly. It helps that Ami hasn't gone far, just a couple clicks deeper into the forest. Sakura finds her sitting under a huge, gnarled oak tree, her knees pulled up to her chest and her face hidden.

"Uh, hey," Sakura tries, and Ami's head snaps up. Her face has all of the obvious signs of hard crying, and the trepidation in her eyes is almost animal. Her scent is acrid with anger and fear.

Sensing that she's likely to flee, Sakura doesn't approach immediately. "Hey," she repeats. "Can we…talk?"

Ami scowls before looking away. “What, so you can make sure to correct Yugao-nee-san about all of the lies I told her?”

Sakura shakes her head and says, “No. I just wanna know why you did it.”

Ami’s eyes slide back to her, narrowed. “…Why?”

Sakura smiles a little sheepishly. “Because I recently pissed off some people that I care about and learned that the best treatment for anger is understanding. So…I’d like to understand, Ami.”

The purple-haired girl watches her for a moment, suspicious, before she slumps back against the tree. “Fine,” she mutters. Her scent smoothes into something a tiny bit less aggressively fearful.

Sakura takes that as permission to approach, and carefully makes her way over to Ami’s side. She sits down under the tree, close enough to be engaged but with enough distance not to crowd. If there’s something that the ninken contract transference has given Sakura—in addition to the nose, teeth, penchant for chomping, and chakra boost—it’s a better understanding of the more primal side of people. Humans are social animals, after all.

(She also sits to Ami’s left because she really doesn’t want to have to yell “WHAT?” after any low-voiced confessions.)

Ami’s silence seems pretty intentional, so Sakura decides to try and get the conversational ball rolling. “Yugao-sensei mentioned that your parents kind of suck ass,” she says, opting for blunt honesty. It seems like the approach that would resonate best with Ami.

The girl snorts, genuine amusement shining through the noise. “That about sums it up,” Ami agrees.

Sakura waits, sensing that she may now elaborate.

Ami sucks on her teeth for a moment, deep in thought, before she continues. Her voice becomes very quiet, and Sakura is grateful for her own forethought to sit to her left.

“They would just…blame me. For *everything* .”

Ami pauses again and Sakura nods encouragingly, even though ice is pooling in her belly.

“I was the reason they fought all of the time. I was the reason they were struggling financially. It was my fault their friends didn’t like them anymore.” Ami recites each item in a detached voice, like she’s reading a grocery list. “Literally *everything.”*

Sakura can’t help the way her jaw drops. Blaming a child? Their own child, for things that are so clearly not her fault? What kind of people are they?!

“I *think* they were nice to me when I was, like, a baby,” Ami continues, which is a pretty horrifying sentence by itself. “There are pictures from back then where they look happy. I don’t know when it changed.”

Ami sighs, and it hitches into a quiet sob. “I tried to be so good,” she admits. “Quiet…and obedient. I tried to be what they wanted, but I don’t think they wanted me at all. ”

Hesitantly, Sakura scooches closer to the girl. It doesn’t feel right to be so far away when she’s talking about something so painful. When their shoulders finally touch, Ami freezes for a moment. Then, she relaxes.

“Did you know that the only Academy technique I ever learned to do successfully is the Transformation technique?” Ami asks, her voice flat.

Sakura blinks at the apparent non-sequitur, and silently shakes her head.

“I would use it at home,” she admits. “When my parents got mad I’d secretly transform into a mouse or beetle or a fucking paper clip, something they wouldn’t scream at or lock outside. Small enough to hide where it was warm in the house. Quiet enough I could steal something to eat after they went to bed.”

Sakura’s heart drops more and more with each word. Ami was struggling with all of this, and she had no idea. The girl’s skill at Transformation is also pretty incredible; it’s notoriously difficult to change the size of your body to any extreme degree and, furthermore, to transform into an inanimate object. And it sounds like she’d mastered the technique long before the Academy even began officially teaching it. Sakura doesn’t think that this is the time to comment on that, though.

“Then I met you,” Ami says, chuckling dryly. “I really did like you a lot. I liked talking about school stuff with you. And when you invited me over, I just…”

She trails off. Emboldened by their still-touching shoulders, Sakura gently lays her hand on Ami’s back. She doesn’t try any rubbing or patting though, because repetitive motions can sometimes be overwhelming; at least to Sakura.

Ami’s forehead drops onto her knees. “Your parents were *wonderful,”* she mumbles in a broken voice. “I was so, so jealous. When I was walking home that night, I thought…what if I was *you?* Surely my parents hate all kids, it’s not just me. If I went home transformed as you and they were mean to you too, it would prove it. That it wasn’t my fault.”

Sakura feels a chill creeping up her spine at the direction this story is taking. Oh, gods, no.

“And you know what?” Ami says, her voice cracking. “They were lovely to you.”

“Oh, Ami,” Sakura murmurs, horror churning in her gut. “I’m so sorry.”

Ami just laughs hollowly. “They gave you a juice box and a snack and told you how to get home. They offered you dinner. They were so. Fucking. *Nice.”*

Ami pounds the earth with a weak fist with each word. Then, she fists her hand in the grass, her knuckles turning white.

“I resented you for it,” she continues quietly. “I know that’s not fair, but—"

“You don’t have to justify it,” Sakura interjects. “I’d resent you too, if it were me.”

Ami offers her a weak smile in return. “So, I figured, what the fuck. If my parents think I’m this fucked up, evil creature, then fine. I’ll be that. And I turned all of that anger onto you.”

Sakura nods. That part of the story doesn’t need rehashing, at least.

“I moved in with Yugao-nee-san around the same time our classes got split up,” Ami says. “One night, I told her about something I did to you, but phrased it like it happened to somebody else. My therapist says I was looking for acquittal, like if she said what happened was no big deal, then it wouldn’t be, and I could forgive myself.”

Ami sighs. “But she was *horrified.”*

Sakura swallows, her throat clicking dryly. This just keeps getting worse.

Without lifting her head from her knees, Ami mutters, “So I kept telling her, and she kept being so angry, and I couldn’t stop. Maybe I was punishing myself. I made her promise never to tell anyone and I never used your name, because I didn’t want anyone to get in trouble. Honestly, I have no idea why she thinks you did it.”

Ah, now this is all starting to make sense, Sakura thinks. But it *does* raise the question…why did Yugao-sensei think Sakura was the bully? Or involved at all?

“She got me into therapy and that helped a lot,” Ami says. “I told the therapist the truth, but I never confessed to Yugao-nee-san. I guess…I just figured I would deal with it when she eventually found out. Which brings us to today.”

The purple-haired genin’s shoulders suddenly loosen, and she slumps back against the tree trunk with a gusty sigh. A spiritual weight finally removed, perhaps.

“Well, now you know, your old bully is a fuckup and a liar,” Ami deadpans. “Does that make you feel better?”

Sakura leans back to join Ami against the tree. “No, if anything I’m mad you’ve given me a reason to feel sympathetic towards you,” she says with a snort. “My heroic underdog origin story, dead in the water. Bah!”

Ami laughs at that, swiping roughly at the tears on her cheeks. “Fuck you,” she says with no venom at all, and shoves Sakura lightly in the shoulder.

Then her face sobers. “Why are you being so nice to me? I was horrible to you.”

Sakura hums, taking a moment to really consider the question. “I’m hardly perfect,” she begins, gazing up at the leaves overhead. “I was awful to Naruto, the classic ‘bullied becomes the bully when given the chance’ scenario. I’m just lucky that he doesn’t have a vindictive bone in his body.”

Now it’s Sakura’s turn to release a heavy sigh. “Not to mention Ino. I broke off our friendship because of a crush, which I *thought* was true love, and it still might be, but it turns out I get crushes on like… everybody. I dunno. Being rivals with her is fun too but I wish we

weren't so mean about it. I bet we could compete for Sasuke's attention and still be friends."

Sakura's feelings towards the boy are so weird now, too. Confusing more than anything.

Ami blinks at her, surprised. "You and the Yamanaka aren't tight anymore?" she asks. "I figured you two would get married or something. You were attached at the hip."

Sakura flushes. "M-married to Ino?! But…but she's a girl!" And like a sister to Sakura! It'd be like marrying Naruto—*blech!*

Ami just raises an unimpressed brow. "So what? I'm gonna marry a girl."

"You are?" Sakura gasps, a little dumbly. "But…"

The other girl's eyes narrow, and her posture becomes stiff. "You got a problem with that?"

But Sakura is already shaking her head. "No, no, not at all, um…my uncle is, um." Somehow, she's never said the word, but no time like the present, right? "Gay, he's gay. A man's man, y'know. Into…men." Okay now she's just rambling like an idiot, *god.*

"Gay uncle, got it," Ami says dryly, now seeming to be very amused instead of hostile.

"And I, um," Sakura stutters, feeling an immovable *need* to finally say this to someone, to make it real with words. "I think I like girls, too. Like how I like boys."

The purple-haired genin looks mildly surprised, but perhaps more so by the fact that Sakura had the guts to say it, rather than the confession itself. A slow grin is curling her lips, some kind of gentle fondness that makes Sakura's scalp tingle. "Yeah?"

Sakura smiles tremulously, feeling lightheaded. "Yeah."

Ami grins at her before it morphs into more of a smirk. “So you like girls but not Ino? She’s so cute though. And those eyes…”

Sakura suppresses a shudder. “She’s too much like a sister to me, I think,” she admits. “But there is, um, one girl…”

Amis’s face lights up with genuine curiosity, and there’s this girlish softness to it, a youngness that makes Sakura feel weirdly old to notice, but it’s…beautiful. The world is harsh and painful sometimes, but there are moments like this, too: two young girls discussing love.

She and Ami may have gotten off to a rough start, but Sakura has a feeling they’re going to become pretty good friends.

“She’s on Might Gai’s team,” Sakura mutters, ears burning. “Tenten. Do you know her?”

“Ooh, pork bun girl?” Ami says, making grabby motions at the crown of her purple hair.

Sakura blinks, nonplussed. “Pork bun?”

Ami nods, continuing to squeeze air above her head. “Yeah, her hair looks like pork buns.” then her face becomes devious. “So, you’re into the more butch type, huh?”

“Butch?” Sakura parrots, beginning to feel like a broken record player.

Ami chuckles but not meanly. “It means like…tomboy, I guess. Less girly.”

Sakura hums, thinking of Tenten’s muscular shoulders. There was that beefy lady at the Tetsugawa onsen, too. “I guess so.”

Ami nods. “So the Uchiha and Tenten…girly boys and boyish girls. Nice.”

Sakura mirrors the nods, albeit more slowly. There's Kakashi-sensei too, though, and he's not girly at all.

Sakura sighs. "I think I just like everyone," she mutters. Fickle heart, indeed.

"I think—"

But whatever Ami thought in that moment is lost forever, because there's a rustle in the bushes, a muted *pomf!* followed by the tree suddenly being shrouded in a sweet smelling smoke. Then, everything goes black.

"Sakura, hey, Sakura!! Wake up!"

Sakura snorts, jerking into consciousness. *What the f—*

The genin tries to blink the fuzziness away, making an attempt to rub her eyes, but finds her hands immovable. In fact, they appear to be bound, behind her back.

Well, crap.

She's not alone, at least. Ami is sitting on the ground next to her, similarly bound. Her expression is more pissed off than afraid, which is oddly reassuring.

"Where are we?" Sakura asks, looking around. From the looks of it, the large, main hall of a traditional ryōkan inn. Everything is sparingly but elegantly decorated, all natural wood and tatami floors. There are three exits, one is a set of large wooden doors on the far side of the room, and the others are obscured by noren fabric dividers. The fabric of one is adorned with a large *yu* character, perhaps indicating it leads to the baths.

Sakura absorbs the information as quickly as she can, trying to make sense of it all. Whatever had knocked them out has left her brain

feeling fuzzy. There's a stack of neatly folded futons in the corner, like people have been sleeping in the lobby. Weird. A stack of wooden barrels by the wooden doors, stamped with a crest Sakura doesn't recognize. An unmanned reception desk with a vase full of fire-lilies, a flower endemic to central fire. Okay, so they're probably not too far from Konoha at least. That's a plus!

"Dunno," Ami answers. "But we're getting the hell out of here!"

"Not so fast!"

Sakura and Ami both freeze, their attention immediately drawn to the figure suddenly before them.

It's…it's…

A…tanuki?

Indeed, a tanuki raccoon-dog stands proudly before the two young girls. He's got his arms akimbo, paws on his hips, and he's wearing a red and navy-black checkered haori. It's adorable. It's confusing. It's probably not nearly as alarming as it should be, given that Sakura and her unintentional partner-in-being-kidnapped are still bound by rope.

Also, something about the tanuki's scent is familiar…

"Wait a minute," Sakura's eyes narrow. "You're one of the raccoon-dogs that ate my apology!"

Sakura distantly hears Ami mutter *what?* but that doesn't matter right now, what matters is that Sakura has a chance to get square with those apology-ruining furry stinkers! It's fate!

"Where's the one with the eye-scar?!" she asks, wriggling in her bindings.

"You will use my father's name when you speak of him!" the tanuki responds hotly, pointing at Sakura with one shiny black claw. "His

name…is Hachiburo-bucho!”

Despite everything, Sakura feels her lip curl with a little amusement, and her thrashing eases a little. Boss Hachiburo? It’s such a cute name!

“Did somebody call for me?”

All heads whip towards the source of the new voice, gravelly and low and a little dozy, like they just woke up. Another tanuki emerges from behind the fabric noren emblazoned with *yu,* a towel wrapped around his waist. His fur is damp and a wave of mineral-scent fills the room, like he just came from a hot-spring. Sakura gasps when she notices the knot of scar-tissue that sits in place of an eye, and the large rosary around his neck. Her nemesis!

The singular-eye widens and the tanuki nearly drops his towel as he takes in the view before him with obvious shock. “Momoburo, what have you done?” he demands, utterly agog.

Sakura takes advantage of the brief distraction to focus some chakra into her extremities, and with a quick inhale, she rips straight through the ropes around her wrists and ankles. Sakura leaps to her feet, fully intending to free her comrade. Shannaro!

But such chivalry is unneeded; Ami apparently had a similar thought and is already on her feet. Her bindings slide to the floor completely intact, as if she’d managed to slip out of them somehow. Interesting.

Focus! Sakura berates herself, pulling out a kunai. The two genin quickly move to stand back to back, Sakura facing the one-eyed tanuki and Ami, their captor.

“We don’t know how much backup they have lurking around in here,” Ami says over her shoulder in a low voice. Sakura nods grimly. “We should try to knock ‘em down and then make a run for it.”

The term the Academy had taught them to use in this scenario is *strategic retreat.* Sakura has heard several colloquialisms over the years, hit and run, bash n' dash, kiss em' and quit. It's one of those things that a young, green student might turn their nose up at: *I'll never run from a fight!* and other such sentiments. But Sakura has learned a few too many hard lessons lately, and she doesn't need a refresher on the rather basic tenet of "fully engaging enemies on their turf is the stupidest choice imaginable."

"If you can bring them both close, I can land a hit," Sakura whispers, knowing that surprise will once again be her greatest weapon here. Well, that and speed.

"You got it!" Ami salutes, and then in a puff of smoke, transforms her arms from the elbow down into long, weighted chains.

What. *What.*

Sakura only has a moment to admire such an insane, high-level application of the Transformation technique—changing an isolated part of her body into an inanimate object?! It's unheard of!—before the purple-haired girl whips the chains in opposite directions, aiming them at the two tanuki. The weights at the end of the chains make quick work of wrapping around each creature, and with a grunt, she yanks them both forward.

Sakura blinks away her shock, determined to make the most of Ami's skillful incapacitation. One flicker brings her to the captor tanuki, meeting him halfway as he's yanked forward. She opts to multi-task and jumps to land a two-footed kick to his belly and use him as a springboard at the same time, launching herself back towards the eye-scar tanuki.

This time, she makes it a little personal. *Revenge for my apology!*

The tanuki, still apparently shocked into motionlessness, has no time to defend against her seeking hands. She threads one into the rosary around his neck, twisting her body to be flush against his, and

grips the waist of his towel with her other hand. Ami's chains slip away at the perfect time—and Sakura is thunderstruck for a shred of a moment by how well they work together—and then Sakura sweeps his furry little legs and hurls the tanuki over her shoulder in an o-soto-gari throw.

He hits the ground with a great *oof!* and Sakura sends a silent thank you to Lee, on whom she had practiced that throw about thirty times the other day.

Then something strange happens.

A literal wave of chakra reverberates out from the eye-scar tanuki—right, Hachiburo-bucho—sending Sakura staggering backwards. Hachiburo-bucho convulses once before being taken over by a coughing fit, as if he'd had the air knocked out of him. Then, he seems to change. His fur brightens from dull, barely discernible shades of gray-brown to the punchy stripes of a younger animal, and his body suddenly grows larger, increasing to nearly double his original size. Sakura can only watch, completely and utterly baffled, as the once-appropriately sized towel around his waist is ripped to pieces.

The rosary, which had slipped off of his neck from the throw and remains in Sakura's grip, pulsates once, then twice, before it goes almost…limp. Or inert, anyway.

Sakura's gaze flickers from raccoon-dog to rosary, her eyes widening with alarm. Is this thing…cursed?!

She's about to fling the dang thing across the room when the voice of the other raccoon-dog, Momoburo, catches her attention.

"Father!" he cries, obviously still a little winded from her blow, as he crawls across the room. "You–you're free! The rosary—!"

Hachiburo-bucho groans as he slowly straightens to be on his hind legs, now tall enough to be of a height with Kakashi-sensei.

Sakura and Ami both seem to take this as their cue to flee, and they briefly meet eyes before whirling to head for the door.

“Wait!”

Despite her better judgment, Sakura hesitates, turning to look at the now suddenly very large tanuki.

“Wait,” he says again, more gently this time. “I know you must be afraid, but please do not go just yet.”

He speaks lowly but quickly, clearly wise to the fact that the two genin are fully ready to run for their lives.

“Sakura,” Ami says warningly, her gaze flicking between her comrade and the door. “We should go.”

Sakura bites her lip. Something in her gut is telling her to stay.

The enormous raccoon-dog surprises them both by suddenly dropping to his knees and folding into a dogeza, his furry forehead pressed against the wood floor. His son gapes in shock for a moment before scrambling to join his father in the apologetic bow.

“Please,” Hachiburo-bucho pleads. “Allow me to explain.”

Sakura and Ami share a glance, before the purple-haired girl finally nods, her stance loosening.

“Okay,” Sakura swallows, and points at the tanuki with a confidence she doesn’t really feel. “Start talking.”

Editing to add: y’all…Transformation Technique is *not* an illusion in canon. Literally in Naruto vs Gaara, Naruto changes Gamabunta into Kurama so he can grip onto Shukaku with claws. It being an illusion is fanon that people came up with to deal with how overpowered and plot-bungling shapeshifting can be. I promise I research my shit lol.

Also it’s funny that the one canon chakra thing I reference (instead of making up my own lore) is incorrectly called out as being wrong/fan-made.

***Editing again to say: wow! Ami redemption arc is really polarizing, huh. I guess I should have expected that. I’d ask you all to remember that canon Sakura *also* kind of sucks. She’s rude, violent, hypocritical, spineless, completely resigned to being a victim forever and literally makes fun of Naruto for being an orphan. She’s written shittily bc Kishimoto clearly doesn’t know how to write anything other than the bitch, slut, shy, and mother tropes for women. Hence why I am reinventing her in this fic. I’d appreciate it if we extended the same grace to other ladies in the Naruto universe. I've had multiple commenters say they hope Sakura (or somebody else) physically hurts her (or enacts some kind of vengeance) for her behavior when she was in the Academy (so ~6 years old), and being actively abused by her parents.

And that is...scary, to be honest. She is a *child.* I'm not saying that children should be able to do whatever they want (and yes, it's important that Ami understands that what she did was wrong, apologizes, and demonstrates a change in behavior going forward), but some readers seem to want me to hold her as responsible as I would an adult. A 6 year old child acting out/bullying classmates because she's experiencing abuse and neglect at the hands of her parents is not some serial abuser that needs to be punished. They are a victim who has been failed by the adults in their life.

~~A WILD AMI HAS BEEN SPOTTED!~~

~~but for real, this was supposed to be a tiny little side adventure where ami was going to be her old bratty self (a foil to Sakura's growth) but like...having girls been shitty and catty to each other for no reason is stupid and boring. i just couldn't do it. so, backstory! growth! yeehaw! and now Ami is actually important to the MAIN main plot, whodathunk? also, you can't tell me that yugao and ami aren't related. they literally have the exact same color palette!~~

~~also, little baby queers being fruity together just makes my heart sing :')~~

---

anyway, as always, comments fuel my writing, give me life, and make me smile :)

next time: the tragic tale of hachiburo the boss tanuki.
